

# Fishers of Hope

by J. E. Cammon

June Day sprinted with urgency through the halls of the Armistice. Whenever she passed a window looking out into space, if it wasn't already covered, she didn't bother looking out, but not because of her hurry; no one did anymore. She was young, but the stars disappearing was an old story. It was a wonder that people felt the need to pass it down; she had certainly been curious why her parents had bothered telling her. That in days generations-gone, the blackness of space had been filled with endless lights of prismatic color, that humanity couldn't count all of the things called stars. But, she supposed, that times like those could come again was the sort of thing that stoked the fires of the cinders. And made diverman like her necessary for the future. As such, people got out of her way as she hustled along.

When she thought about the trajectory of her life, June was warmed by the nostalgia. The first time she had ever seen a diverman, the man had been on his way to die, but no one knew that at the time. The man had departed behind the applause and adoration of the assembled mass, the group a minority of some several thousand making the old freighter their home. And when he hadn't come back alive, everyone seemed to think it was the most natural thing in the universe. June had been perplexed by that, too, until she had grown up, and started diving herself.

Finally, she reached the hangar and caught sight of her crew's ship, the Pandora. Better yet, she caught sight of Revel.

"Slow down, child, what could be so big a hurry?" he asked as she rushed up. Revelry Dawn was just old enough to make it ambivalent as to whether his white hair was caused by his age or his profession. He had strong hands though, quick and steady. At his feet were spools of rope and climbing gear.

"Em's in trouble," June replied, taking a moment to slow her breathing. Revel sighed.

"I suppose the captain should be informed. Is it drugs or gambling?" The crew had rules, those set forth as agreeable and sensible which most diverman followed, and then ones that applied to their crew specifically, as mandated by the captain. Most had to do with safety and timeliness, but one applied to their pilot specifically.

"We need to hurry," June said, entering the ship. With the engines off, the tight corridors were dark. However, so long as they were clear, one of their crew's specific mandates, June was fine. Through practice, she had developed a good sense for running through darkness safely. Shar stepping out of her room was an unforeseen hazard, though.

"Watch it, pup," the woman barked. Charlotte Hayes was around Revel's age, and was turning away from the irascibility of her youth into the cantankerousness of middle age. June thought for a moment to tell the woman what was going on, but a lecture would've denied what might have been precious minutes.

As usual, the doorway marked Tomorrow was closed. As the rule demanded, June knocked, albeit urgently.

"What?" he asked from inside.

"Captain, Em's in trouble," she said, keeping her ear close to the door.

"Specify the trouble, June," the captain said.

"Five point seven, Captain," she said. Before her sentence was finished the door was opened. Morrow Israel, Revel claimed, was the spitting image of his father: tall with broad shoulders and a strong features. But his eyes were his mother's: light gray discs with specs of brown. The captain's eyebrows were stern. Emergencies didn't come up often on the Armistice, and everyone knew how the captain felt about practical jokes.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"Chroma," she said. Morrow shot past her a moment later, his door closing lazily behind him.

"Dammit. Why didn't you just call?"

"He took my com," she yelled at his back, hurrying to catch up. The pilot had cleverly affected the theft before the trouble started. She might have called the authorities, but they took care of their own. That was a rule most followed.

Upon exit, Revel was waiting. That left either Shar or her to watch the ship. June glanced over at the other woman and looked right into her stare.

"Shar," Morrow started.

"Got it, go save your stick jockey," she replied. And then they were running again. June glanced back at Shar once before they left the hangar. The woman didn't approve of someone with Emerson's history to be their pilot. Though, she didn't approve of much of anything. She and Revel made a strange pair. He was a candler, and not like a pretender, the kind of people who claimed to be, who took comfort in the illusion of belief. Revel honestly believed that a brighter time was coming. June had an ulterior motive in studying with him that she'd yet to admit. And it was hard work, too. To say that night was darkest before the dawn was one thing, like her mother was fond of doing. Revel believed. And in that way, strangely, Shar was a nihilist. June had surmised that the lack of conflict had a lot to do with Morrow. She hadn't figured out yet what he was.

"Idle hands," Revel quoted as they went.

"I thought you didn't believe in the devil," Morrow said.

"I don't. But that doesn't mean all this time hasn't been a temptation for him."

Color bars like Chroma were one of the Armistice's many distractions. It used to be a pleasure cruise ship, but had been recommitted, and renamed. But depression and dementia were widespread, so many of the clubs had stayed as such. Secretly, even June had tried the hallucinogen once, and it'd be a lie to say that it wasn't a pleasant experience. Looking at the paintings, playing with the colored sands, watching the light shows, it was good not to have to focus on hoping all the time.

When they arrived, the line of people usually present was absent. Morrow slowed to the entrance and stopped. Revel and June also surveyed the situation before entering.

At first glance, the only occupant was their pilot, sitting in a chair near the back of the room, facing the door. On closer inspection, the men Emerson had been gambling with could be seen lying on the floor, unconscious. June had been wrong. Emerson wasn't in trouble; Emerson was trouble. Morrow stepped into the room finally.

"Dammit, Em," the captain said. He walked over, and Revel and June followed. A gash above the pilot's right eye was visible, along with some bruises. The men on the floor were much worse off.

"The end of the human race is that it will eventually die of civilization," Emerson wrote in the air as he talked.

"Rev," the captain said. The older man nodded, bending over to help their pilot out of his chair. As he rose, the pilot looked down on one of the gamblers.

"No change of circumstance can affect a defect of character." When last she had seen the pilot, he had been surrounded by larger men armed with clubs and other blunt weapons. She was afraid he'd lose even more than his freedom. Time was the only thing any of them had, and Em gambled with his. Everyone thought they were crazy, but Em was the only one of them who truly was. When they turned around, they could see that the doorway had been filled with the Armistice's guards.

The constables were the only people on the ship with guns, and carried out the law. According to Revel, crime hadn't decreased so much as it had become less creative. The last things people had were more than enough to kill for. There wasn't enough time, or enough space to go around.

"Captain," the man in front said, stepping forward and looking around.

"Commander," Morrow replied.

"Grisly scene," the commander said, then he didn't speak for a long moment. "I want you to know, as citizens of the Armistice,

we're going to do our due diligence to get to the bottom of the perpetrators of this madness," he said.

"I appreciate that," Morrow said. Being a diverman did have certain privileges but this was something June had never heard of. But, she had come to the Armistice for a reason. Even other diverman had heard of Morrow Israel and the Pandora. The constables parted for them, and they were almost through the door before the commander spoke suddenly.

"Oh, I'm sorry." He tapped the front of his head forgetfully. "I have a message from the governor. He wants to see you. Now." Morrow didn't turn around, though.

"On my way," the captain said.

"What do you think he wants?" Revel asked when they were outside.

"How long has it been?" the captain asked.

"Almost three months."

"Well what do you think he wants?" Morrow asked.

"I'll take him back. Go see the governor. And take June," he said. Things were happening above her head. Morrow sighed.

"Let's go," he said, and began moving off down the concourse. June followed.

Morrow said nothing as they walked, and from experience, neither did June. In the beginning, she had taken offense at his reticence, until Revel had pointed out that that was just his way. The candler had maintained that Morrow was in a unique situation, that even though he was grown into a man, he was still sorting some childhood things out. Revel never said, but she knew Morrow's parents had both been divermen, and they had both been killed. Sort of like that nameless man in her memory that flew off one day and never came back. But the couple in question, Gospel and Felicity, they had left behind a son. He was a legacy, which was completely unique among those of the profession, so far as Revel or Shar had heard. And they had been around.

"The plan," Revel had explained, "was for them to retire, pay even for Morrow's life. I was there for the dive Gospel and Felicity made

after they found out she was pregnant. They went to the governor of the cruiser, and they asked for nine whole months." The candler had recounted the tale, and freely admitted his terror. A fourth member, Thelonius, had sacrificed himself to save the rest of them. That was where Morrow had gotten his name. Then a decade later, on a mission half as long, and a third as dangerous, they had lost their lives. Shar, Revel, and another crewman named Hap had been the only survivors. Morrow had been old enough to understand that his parents had died, and how, but not why. June had solemnly absorbed the details, but later she had cried like she was a child again. Yet that was the bargain. Dive work was the only work in the universe a person could retire from.

Under normal circumstances, it was difficult to see the man in charge. The governor was responsible for everything on the Armistice, including resource distribution and trade schedules and flight plans. But five minutes after setting foot on the concourse leading to his offices, Morrow and June were standing in front of the man's desk. He had a huge window in his office, and he hadn't bothered to cover it with a painting or even a simple curtain.

"Israel," the governor said, stepping forward hastily. He shook hands like he was in a hurry, too.

"Some of your men found me, told me you wanted to have words," the captain said. Morrow made no move to sit.

"Yes, yes, well, you might have noticed that I haven't called on you in quite some time."

"Sure," the captain replied.

"And I want you to know, it isn't because I've been looking at a new crew. Not at all. You do good work, and not just for us here on the Armistice. It's important for you to know that." Morrow glanced down at June. "But I had to be sure. And now I," and the governor paused. He pulled an item from his pocket. Beams of light from corners of the room projected and focused, bringing an image into view in the center of the room, hanging in the air. The image was of a world, spinning lazily. "Now, we're out of time."

"What am I looking at?" Morrow asked.

"Attalanta," the governor replied. He walked through the projection, making the world twist and constrict. He showed Morrow the remote and pointed to a symbol at the bottom. June leaned in to see. "That stands for Atlantis. It's the corporation that designed this projection system, and the ship around it, and so many other things. A hundred years ago, they were pioneering communications. I'll spare you the details, but this was the home world for their headquarters. It would have all the archived data from their entire company's history stored on files." And there it was. Worlds, and the shrapnel of worlds torn asunder streaked through the black and there was no way to see them without a ships' navigational systems. But how people built, got their food, fuel, resources, plans, and starmaps, their information, was affected by human hands.

"Files," Morrow repeated. The governor nodded. "Stored where?"

"Within a secure computer bank," the governor said.

"Where?" the captain asked again.

"In a sub-basement," came the quiet reply. Morrow turned and began walking towards the door. June followed him. Any place still intact was only just so; when whatever happened that made the stars go out, it also threw everything around, like someone shaking a bag full of rocks. Things smacked into each other, causing catastrophic structural damage, which made crawling beneath the surface the quickest way to get dead there was.

"Please, just hear me out."

"Not interested."

"You don't understand. They had a demonstration on their centennial."

"Don't care."

"They beamed Xenabytes of information from Earth, hundreds of them. All of that information, thought lost."

"You have a good day, governor."

"I offer eternity!" The door to the office swished open but Morrow did not step through. June, stopped a hair short, could hear the captain breathing; she could hear him thinking. "Liberty for you and your crew, for the rest of your lives. That's my offer, Israel." The

door swished shut in the captain's face, but neither did he turn. June suspected she knew what the others would say. At least, she knew what her opinion was. They endangered themselves with every dive. So one dive for the rest of their lives made sense. Perfect, crazy sense. Slowly, the captain turned.

"Eternity."

"Yes."

"For files," Morrow said. The governor pressed another button.

"This building here," and a little yellow dot glowed brightly on the surface of the planet. "Is where you'll need to go. The files are stored in a sub-basement beneath it." The image zoomed in on the blinking dot, which turned out to be a titanic structure. It looked like a space station, but set into the ground. June had seen their like before, but never upright. Like everyone else she knew or had ever heard of, she was born on a ship hurtling through black space. The governor used his hands to form the corners of a rectangular shape. "They used data plates, fed into the computer. It shouldn't be too heavy. Simply remove it, and bring it back."

"For files," Morrow repeated.

"For information, captain," the governor corrected. "With all the lost data, we can make things we trade for now, repair ships thought derelict, or even build new ones. We can stop guessing at why all this happened. Wouldn't you want to know, if you could?" It was an urgent enough appeal. Morrow Israel said nothing, nor did he move an inch.

"And you're telling me now because," he said.

"The window is closing." Another gesture from the governor caused the image to zoom out again. "A moon is coming." After the virtual impact, the planet wasn't a planet at all. "We've got less than two days," the governor said. Casually, the captain turned around again, and this time when the door opened, he did step through. "Didn't you hear me? Two days!" the governor said with June rushing after Morrow.

"Then you'll have my answer before tomorrow won't you?" the captain replied. He never turned back around.



Later, the captain put it on the table for the crew to decide, and he laid it out just like the governor said: half a day to decide to commit to the dive to end all dives.

"I say yes," Revel spoke up first.

"I'm in, too." June was right behind. Shar made a dismissive noise with her mouth.

"Why the hell not," she said a moment later.

"It is not length of life, but depth of life," Emerson agreed. All eyes turned to Morrow.

"It's underground," he mentioned again.

"Which will mean rope and climbing gear," Revel said.

"And cave-ins," Shar added.

"Into a high-security facility," the captain repeated himself.

"With no power for its security systems," Revel countered.

"And we can't map it before hand, either," Shar said. June had to be told about the building metrics of some facilities that repelled the tech of their mapping tools, which let them scan through certain materials.

"For a chance to make better the lives of not only ourselves, but everyone else who is, and might be," Revel said. June kept her face straight, but wanted to hug the man.

"If you could know why all this happened, would you want to?" Morrow asked Revel the governor's question. The older man smiled.

"You forget that I already do," was his reply. Shar farted. But she had nothing else to say. And that decided it. June Day smiled widely.

Within the hour, the governor had the answer he wanted, and the rest of his information concerning the facility was downloaded to the Pandora's computers. The governor had been scrounging up information for years, and from everywhere he could find. The man was thorough, which made him easier to work for. He had a brief recording of a man in a long white jacket talking proudly about the company's achievement, gesturing at a tall bank of computers with blinking lights on the front. They watched the recording several times and committed the size and shape of the thing to memory.

As Emerson began ramping up the systems, June and Revel did a walk-around of the ship, checking for any malfunctioning or damaged parts. She caught sight of a small boy watching from the mouth of the hangar. The child waved. June waved back. She and Revel tested their coms: they informed the pilot that there was nothing wrong that they could see, and he in turn told them all systems were level. They embarked. Shortly thereafter, warning lights began blinking. The child retreated backwards only a step to escape the closing door.

In the front glass, their view of the hangar was pushed sideways by a dark square of black. As they left the Armistice, space looked like a mouth swallowing the ship whole.

"You sure he isn't on anything?" Shar asked, sitting in her seat with her legs crossed.

"He's fine," Morrow said.

"I can hear you," the pilot replied, but didn't turn his head.

"Good, then fly the damn ship," the captain said. Emerson didn't take his hands off the wheel, nor did he rebut.

Out in the black, what the ship saw was very different than what they could spy with naked eyes. Attalanta was a smaller world, only slightly larger than a moon. At the behest of its pilot, the Pandora began her approach. Once, Emerson had described to June how re-entry worked. She was new and he wanted it known how difficult his job was. Diverman pilots had a stigma for being glorified getaway drivers.

"In skating over thin ice, our safety is our speed," the pilot had said.

They approached the facility from the opposite side of the planet, skimming along almost parallel to the planet's surface. They traveled a thousand miles laterally to sink a few thousand feet vertically.

They glided over the facility, spotlights and three-dimensional optics revealing the dimensions and textures of the terrain below. Morrow sat forward in his chair, instructing. They'd survey the situation, and if it looked impassable, they'd ditch. Morrow would

face the governor himself and apologize and do whatever else was required. The Pandora's lights illuminated the caved-in facility, a far cry from the upstanding structure June had seen in the governor's office

"So how many tons of rock would you say that is?" Shar asked.

"Spiral out," Morrow ordered, and slowly, they made an expanding, circular route until they found huge chunks of rock sticking up out of the ground, creating sloped pits in the terrain. Anticipating the next order, Emerson tipped the Pandora's nose down, trying to adjust the angle from which the instruments could read.

But the pilot shook his head. It was the next to the last moment when ditching was a likelihood. Morrow thought carefully and quietly. Then he gave the order to suit up.

One room of the ship was dedicated to the storage and protection of the most valuable equipment in the crew's arsenal. There were breech keys and explosives and geo-mappers and pry-kits, but more valuable than them all were the suits that made diving possible at all. A long time ago, someone had had the idea to go harvesting through the darkness for supplies. Suits had already been made to for space walks, but they were bulky, and not nearly durable enough. So, people contrived better ones. Before syncing, they all looked like they were wearing a larger person's clothes, but with the twist of an accuator, the suits became snug. After gathering the rest of the basic equipment, everyone had their own personal additions. Morrow's was his father's multi-tool, a handheld device that had a variety of uses that the captain used for everything from opening locks to propping open doors. Shar liked to carry extra rope. June had drawing chalk from when she was a child, a gift from her father; it was a keepsake that turned out to be useful. Revel's was a cylindrical canister that bent fingers could just narrowly encircle. She'd never seen one used, but he called it starlight. The candler carried it close to his heart, in a pocket attachment magnetized to his suit.

With a last word from Emerson, who had picked his landing spot, they exited through an airlock. For speed, they all went out at the same time, bunched tightly. Predictably, Revel put his arms around all of them.

"I love you all," he said.

"Permission to leave him here," Shar said. Morrow said nothing. When the other side of the lock opened, slicing cold reached out and coated their suits in ice. A rip or a tear would mean instant death. Morrow lead them over to the hole in the ground, following the nether end of his helmet light. He knelt, and everyone looked over his shoulder, down into the pit. He pointed a wrist, and a metric on his arm told him how far it was down. He stood and looked towards the facility.

"I'll wager the lower levels are wider than the upper ones," he said.

"Agreed."

"Shar, anchor," Morrow said. Quickly, she began un-spooling her rope while Revel secured climbing screws into the ground. In minutes, Morrow was walking down the wall, his secondary light source pointed down. He went alone. And when he reached the bottom, he knelt again, pointing with his wrist.

"Good news?" Shar asked.

"Three hundred meters," the captain said. June sidestepped so she had a clear view of the complex and pointed her geo-mapper.

"Call it three-fifty" she said.

"Good. It's clear. Going to have to crawl, though."

"Oh, joy." Shar stayed as anchor and June and Revel went down second, and then third. The older woman descended last, confidently but not quickly. At the bottom, they all saw what Morrow meant. Without complaint, Shar dropped to her stomach and scurried through the narrow space right after the captain, followed by June and then Revel. The crawling was extremely slow going, requiring them to occasionally push themselves up and walk-crawl forward, or drop completely flat and drag themselves forward with

their arms. The path had to be cleared of anything that could potentially tear at their suits, and the ceiling had to be carefully observed lest some foreign snag hook them in place. June concentrated on her breathing and the bottoms of Shar's boots.

Three hundred meters later, with everyone's breathing crowding the coms, they stopped, having reached their destination.

"I don't suppose there's a welcome mat," Shar said.

"Just a wall," the captain replied, pausing. "And it's confirmed: the mapper isn't breaking through."

Shar's feet shuffled about in June's vision, annoyed. It was something to focus on, but not moving gave everything a desperate finality. June's elbow scraped against the ceiling. Revel's hand on her boot calmed her.

"Blast it is. Breecher should do," Morrow said. Revel moved first, slowly and carefully, but stayed close enough to help guide June and she in turn to help guide Shar as they all moved backwards for safety. Up ahead, Morrow was removing the long cylinder each of them carried on their backs. The breech key had a pump action slider, which primed a violent pulse that, at close ranges, could blow through stone and metal. Supposedly, it could be used safely up to five primings, but none of them had ever gone past three.

"We're set," Shar reported, after which Morrow began counting down. After the captain got to one, there was an explosion up ahead followed by dust and debris sweeping over all of them. June couldn't see, but reached out hurriedly for Shar's boot in case something happened. With her other hand, she pushed against the floor of the tight space to make sure she wasn't moving. "Captain?" Shar asked. "Iz," she said after a moment with greater urgency.

"Clear," the captain said finally. "This building is messing with my com. Em?"

"Present," the pilot said.

"We might go silent here in a few minutes. How's the window?"

"Eighteen hours until impact," Emerson replied.

"Alright, give me a mark for nine," Morrow said. They all put hands to wrists. "Mark," and the timer was set. June crawled after Shar who began moving again.

Sure enough, when they went through the hole, there was static from Emerson's part of communications. Everyone checked their gear, then rechecked. Looking around, they seemed have burst through into a long-stretching corridor. Their helmet lights flashed off into the darkness. Morrow gestured with a wrist, as did they all. They counted out measurements and distances.

"Thoughts, Rev?" the captain asked. The older man flashed his light one way, and then the other.

"This way," he said confidently, and began walking off. Morrow followed without question, with June and Shar directly behind. They moved with knees bent, one hand out touching the wall they had entered through.

At the sound of the first, enormous groan, they all froze in place. It was above their heads, a deep dirge passing through the complex. They turned their lights to follow it, and occasionally a bit of dust interrupted the light rays.

"Braces are failing," Shar whispered to no one.

"It must have been much warmer in here before," Revel said.

"Yeah, let's move it along," the captain nudged Revel in the shoulder gently. At each room, they inspected the space quickly, marking it for damage and potential hazards. At every turn, they put markers on their mappers, and June left a symbol in chalk. They worked cautiously, always with one eye on the timer. Eventually, after hours of such, they had a feel for the place, how the designers intended for it to be used. Their ancestors had built expansively and grandly. It wasn't wasteful for a hallway to stretch on seemingly forever, or for a room to only contain one thing, resulting with a glut of extra volume. They followed routes such as these if they were looking for general supplies. But they were looking for something specific this time, so they'd have to seek out the central section, the

place the sub basement was constructed for. June hoped along with the others that the center held.

Staring down an elevator shaft, the second groan came crashing down on them from above, augmented by the hollow backbone of the complex.

"Well, if we're on three," the captain said, looking at the large number painted onto the wall, then glancing at the display on his wrist, "and it's ten meters down, seems like we need to go down," he reasoned. Revel agreed, and Shar had no objections. Without enough rope, they had to use the dangling cables in the middle of the shaft. Shar went first, reaching out and inspecting the coiled material in her gloved hands. She swung out into the middle of the shaft and hung there for a moment, waiting for disaster. When it didn't come, she slid down.

"Clear," she said through the com.

"Age before beauty," Morrow said to Revel.

"Too kind," the older man said, swinging onto the cable and down. When he was about halfway, something snapped high above their heads. Morrow instantly focused his helmet light up.

"Move Rev!" he yelled. Curious, June looked up, too, and it was only the captain snatching her backwards that prevented the lift from decapitating her. Standing a meter from the open doorway, she and Morrow watched cracks begin to develop in the floor and walls following the crashing impact. "Rev," Morrow said.

"We're fine," Shar said through the com. "But he used up the rest of his extra lives for that one." She sounded a little worried, and Revel was grunting and breathing heavily.

"Okay, we'll be down in," Morrow began.

"No," Revel interrupted him. "We're already down here," and he paused to inhale sharply. "We'll get the data, my boy. Just," and again, "just check the exit." The captain's face was emotionless.

"Check," he said after a moment, and began walking back the way they had come. June put an arm up, but didn't impede him with it, then followed. Shar reminded them of a room that they had seen previously, where the floor was tilted downward, forming a

ramp on the one beneath it, but Morrow was already there, inspecting it again. As a secondary exit, it served their purposes. "Your go," he said to June. She went flat against the floor and inched backwards off the ledge, then let herself hang by the arms, then dangle by the fingers. She inspected the landing beneath her then let go. Looking around, the room seemed to be identical in size and purpose, except with all the contents of the one above it lying about in chaotic piles.

"Clear," June said. Morrow landed evenly, and inspected the closed door to the room. The captain waited while June removed her breecher and primed it. After the blast, Morrow stepped past her and examined the hallway beyond, then moved forward. Together, they traced a path that Shar and Revel were taking directly below them. It was slow, and there was no sound except for Revel's haggard breathing. At each turn, Morrow marked on his mapper and J. D. used her chalk. They blasted through double doors into a room with a metal floor sectioned off with deliberate squares.

"We're here," Shar said. The captain stomped with his foot.

"Can you reach the ceiling?" he asked.

"Maybe, why?"

"I don't know if we can blast through just from our side."

"The floor is reinforced," June offered. Revel inhaled sharply again.

"Okay. I'll rig something up. Stand by." Shar said. Morrow went to work on the floor with his father's multi-tool. June helped map out the dimensions of the shape charge they would use. It need only be about as big around as a person, to maximize the efficacy of the explosives. Almost as rare as Revel's starlight, the stuff was highly functional in sub zero environments, which meant it was decently useful in the conditions they worked in. They guesstimated at the general placement. Shar announced that she was drawing a box with an X in the center.

"Same here," Morrow lied. What he drew, Revel's breathing in his ears, was a circle with the symbol of the candelers in



the middle: it could be mistaken for a lower case I, but was actually a candle with a diamond-shaped flame. "Done," he said.

"Done," Shar called.

"You call it," Morrow said, standing next to June around the corner from their doorway.

"Alright, I got the data plates," Cy said.

"Plural?" Morrow asked. "How many?" Shar began the countdown rather than answer. The hole was smaller than they would've liked, but it did blow clear through. The silence that followed was quickly filled by the third moan. Something above their floors rumbled and crashed. Morrow slid to the hole and stared down.

"Time to go," he said. And stopped. Revel was sitting against the doorway of the room below, with his legs extended. One boot was mangled, like it had been crushed and twisted. June looked over Morrow's shoulder, down at the fallen candler. Shar was standing near the man over a pile of data plates at her feet. They looked heavy and in the double digits. And the sounds above their heads weren't stopping.

"I can rig up a way to," Shar began, but Morrow interrupted her. He pitched himself forward, rolling into the hole and down. He landed easily, inspecting the situation.

"You go up first," he said, snatching at the rigging the woman already had set up.

"But,"

"Move. Now," the captain ordered. The older woman said nothing else, but moved with dispatch, first arranging a bundle for the plates. June waited for the bundle while she eavesdropped.

"Is this the part where you save me, Iz?" Revel asked. The captain was crouched over the older man, inspecting his leg. Morrow didn't say anything for a moment. June took hold of a voluminous stack of data plates bound with rope.

"No, you lazy bastard. I'm just here to help you up, now rise," he said, putting a hand out. Revel grabbed onto it, and lifted himself onto his good leg.

"I'm sorry I had to be the one to tell you they had been lost," the man said. "We drew straws, you know, Shar, Hap, and me. I was happy to do it, but we had to draw straws. It was the righteous thing, Hap said." June sent the rope back down, then she heard the ceiling crack above her.

"Guys," she said, unsurprised that her voice was uneven. Morrow snatched the rope from Shar's hands and threw it to Revel.

"Harness yourself with that," he said, and put his hands flat against his thigh, gesturing at the older woman. "Come on, granny." She snarled, running at him, and shoved herself off of his pushing hands. June bent down and grabbed the woman's forearms and yanked. Revel was tying and knotting as Shar lifted herself out of the hole. June pitched backwards, onto her back, watching the cracks above their heads pour thick streams of dust into their light. Morrow grunted into the com, and June sat up, looking down into the hole. He had knocked over one of the servers. Their captain stood on top of the machine with bent knees, then exploded upward, just narrowly catching the lip with one hand. Angrily, he pulled himself up, and then rolled out of the way.

"Last chance to leave me," Revel said, limping into view. Shar reached a hand out to receive the thrown rope.

"You don't get out that easy," she said. June grabbed some of the rope too, as did Morrow. They all tugged. Somewhere in the midst of the frenzy and pulling, the ceiling caved in. June was on her back, a weight on top of her. She feared it might be something else until it rolled itself off. .

"June here," she started the chain.

"Shar," the older woman said as she helped the young woman to her feet. Dust obscured everything.

"Morrow," the captain said, walking out of the cloud, with a body thrown over his shoulder.

"Revel" the older man said, tired.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Shar suggested. Morrow, silent and exhausted, spun slowly, kicking things out of his way. A stone rolled sideways to reveal a data plate. The cave in had created

a bowl out of the facility, the braces bearing the most weight failing first. The tons of material laying on the front door were covering most of what they had come for. Carefully, Shar and June extracted what they could.

Getting out proved to be just as slow and arduous as getting in. They had to stop at points and retrace their steps, or let Morrow rest with his burden. Eventually, they made it top side again, and by the time they got back into the airlock, they had transgressed their nine-hour time limit by another three. Emerson hit the jets and they skimmed out of Attalanta's atmosphere.

"Full crew with cargo on board," Emerson announced to the bridge as they approached the opening hangar doors. The pilot closed the channel, and turned in his chair, this time removing his hands from the controls as he looked into their tired faces.

"Peace has its victories, too, but it takes brave men and women to win them," he said. Revel used the last of his strength to lift a data plate more fully into his lap, then he wiped gently at the filth and grime. He smiled at whatever he saw underneath.

"It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," he agreed.

They disembarked, bruised and weary. Revel was on crutches, bound for the infirmary. Morrow had a case for the data plates they recovered to prevent any more damage coming to them. There were four in all, almost half the ones Shar had pulled from the computer. He walked slowly beside his friend. From the door of the Pandora, June could see some people that had gathered. June made sure that the little boy from before saw her.

As the story went, the plates were good enough, satisfying the governor's wildest dreams. Some of the data was spotty because of the damage, but it would still take more time than anyone had to even muddle through everything that was on them. Anyone but the crew of the Pandora. They had forever.

And long before that, the tiny ship was shooting through space again. June had been ambivalent at first, until she figured out the answer to the riddle of what Morrow Israel was, if not a Candler,

and not a pretender, and not a nihilist. The man named tomorrow was a diverman.

