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# Canterbury Hollow

*By Chris Lawson*

**O**F ALL THE TRILLIONS OF people who have lived and who will live, Arlyana and Moko were not especially important, nor heroic, nor beautiful, but for a few moments they were cradled by the laws of nature. In a universe that allows humans to survive in a minuscule sliver of all possible times and places, this is a rare accomplishment.

They met under the Sundome.

Arlyana wanted to see the killing sun for herself so she took the Long Elevator to the surface. The Sundome was a hemispheric pocket of air trapped under massive polymer plates on the crust of a dying planet called Musca. The Sundome persisted only through the efforts of robotic fixers, and the robots themselves needed constant repair from the ravages of the sun.

Through the transparent ceiling of the dome, Arlyana watched the sun rise over the world it had destroyed. The sun was a boiling disk, white and fringed with solar arcs. Ancient archived images showed a turquoise sky, but the sun had long since blown the atmosphere to wisps and now

the sky was black and the stars visible in full daylight. A few degrees to one side, the sun's companion star glowed a creamy yellow.

Dawn threw sunlight across the ruins of the old city. Rising from the center of the city was a tower many kilometres tall. The tower had been even taller once: it had reached all the way to orbit.

As the sun rose in the sky, the number of visitors to the Sundome thinned out. Even knowing they were protected by the dome, it was a terrifying experience for many people to stand beneath the killing sun. They hurried to the Long Elevator and scuttled back home. Not Arlyana: she wanted to face the sun, to challenge its authority to kill her. While the bulk of the people around her withdrew to the safety of the rock beneath their feet, Arlyana chose to go further outward.

The Sundome hosted a number of small buses, life supports on wheels, that allowed visitors to tour the old city. They were rarely used in daylight hours. Arlyana went to the bus bay, now completely emptied of people, and found a bus that was leaving in a few minutes.

At its allotted time the bus gave a little warning beep, the doors closed shut with a pneumatic sigh, and then it trundled out the airlock gates. As the bus moved over the blighted landscape, it gave an automated commentary.

"Different astronomers on Old Earth," said the bus, "reported different colors for our sun over different centuries. When people first settled Musca it was thought that the colors had been misreported due to the primitive telescopes of the time. Now we know that the old astronomers were seeing signs of instability...."

Arlyana tuned out the words, but the sound of the voice was soothing.

The bus made its way over to the great, ruined tower. The tower was impressive but once it had been majestic, almost god-like in its engineering. Now it was a candle stub of eroded carbon. The soil at the foot of the tower had been baked to glass.

The bus interrupted its commentary. "My apologies," said the bus, "but a high energy sunburst has erupted and high levels of radiation are expected. The bus will now return for your own protection."

"I have been balloted," Arlyana said. She held up her ballot card. "Continue the tour."

"You are not the only person in the cabin," said the bus.

As the bus spoke, a man at the back of the bus leapt to his feet. This was Moko.

Moko, shaking off his sleep and orienting himself to the situation, held up his own ballot card. "I've been balloted too," he said. "Continue the tour."

"As you wish," said the bus.

Moko said to Arlyana, "I didn't mean to startle you. I lay down on the seat at the back and I must have fallen asleep."

"No need to apologize," she replied. "Come sit with me and enjoy the tour."

The bus took them around the Old City. The voice pointed out the Old Port, and the Old Synod, and the Old Settlement Memorial. Every one of them had long since crumbled to an abstract mass.

Midway through the tour, the bus announced that the sunburst had intensified and even balloted citizens, and buses for that matter, would be damaged by the flood of radiation coming. There was no time to return to the Sundome, so the bus scuttled over to the Old Tower and sheltered in its shadow.

"Well," said Arlyana to Moko, "it appears we are stuck here for now."

"So it does."

She watched him closely. He had a handsome face, if a little pinched at the mouth. He had continued to shave after being balloted, which she looked on approvingly even though she quite liked beards. She extended her hand to him.

"I should let you know that I'm not much in favor of balloted romances," she said.

Moko looked back at her. She was tall and muscular with dark blue skin that had gone out of fashion fifteen years ago but seemed to suit her.

"I agree," he said. "Too desperate."

"I would go so far as to say 'cloying.'"

"Not to mention 'desperate.' It bears repeating."

"So we're in agreement then. Against balloted romances."

"I believe we are." He reached out and took her hand.

It took three hours for the shadow of the tower to connect with the entrance to a safety tunnel. For those three hours they sat together in the bus, hiding in the shade while the sun showered the world with light of

many frequencies and particles of many energies, with some that knocked lesser particles off the land around them and made the world glow.

**T**HEY TOOK the Long Elevator back to Moko's unit because it was closer. It was also much smaller and after skinnings of elbows and barkings of knees, they decided that Arlyana's apartment would have been more suitable after all. But that was three hours down the Grand Central Line and they were already together, if not entirely comfortable, so they lay wedged between Moko's bunk and the bulkhead above it and negotiated their future plans.

"My top three," said Arlyana, "would be to see the First Chamber, to put a drop of blood in the Heritage Wall, and to climb Canterbury Hollow."

"You want to climb Canterbury Hollow? Isn't it enough to just visit?"

"I'm going to climb it and I want you to climb with me."

Moko sighed. "I'm not sure I'm fit enough. Isn't it around eight hundred metres high?"

"Eight-twenty-two," said Arlyana. "But there's only a hundred or so of hard climbing."

"I'd need to get into shape. I'm not sure that's what I want to do with my time."

Arlyana tried to prop herself up on her elbow to read his expression, but she only succeeded in hitting her head. "I know this is a gauche thing to ask," she said, "but how much time do you have?"

"Two weeks."

She sagged back into the mattress. "You could have some of my time. I've got three months."

"I couldn't do that. It's too much to ask."

They lay in silence, thinking.

After several minutes Arlyana spoke up. "So what do you want to do with your time?" she asked.

Moko pursed his lips, then said, "I would like to visit the First Chamber, add a drop of blood to the Heritage Wall, and visit Canterbury Hollow."

She laughed at that. "That's quite a coincidence."

"Truth to tell, I've had no idea what to do with myself since I was

balloted. If you've got some plans, I might as well use them."

Moko and Arlyana donned pressure suits to explore the First Chamber. Artificial lights illuminated the cavern. Rust-red trails of iron oxide dripped down the walls of the cavern.

The Chamber was smaller than they expected. Much, much smaller. Accustomed as they were to living in tight spaces, they still found it incredible that tens of thousands of citizens had once occupied a cavern the size of a sports chamber.

The first Deep Citizens had lived here for decades while they had drilled away at iron and stone, following fissures and air pockets to speed their excavation. As they dug down, deeper into the crust, they had built new cities in the spaces they carved out of bare rock. At first they had merely hoped to escape the solar irradiation, but after two centuries it had become inescapably apparent that the sun was not merely going to scorch the surface. The ferocity of its light was growing and soon it would burn off the atmosphere.

Having built one civilization, the Deep Citizens had to build another, this time sealed from the outside world. They adapted their existing cities and spaces where they could, but not everything could be saved. The First Chamber was too close and too open to the surface and so it had to be abandoned.

The excavating did not always go well. Several of the new spaces collapsed before they could be stabilized. In other chambers, fissures opened to the surface that made it impossible to trap air within.

The tragedy was twofold. The Deep Citizens had built chambers intended not just for themselves and their descendants, but for as many people of Musca as possible. They had drilled too fast and hollowed out chambers too large and too fragile. In their desperation to make room, they had over-reached. There was not enough space—nor air, nor food for that matter—for everyone. Even before the seals were closed, it was apparent that there would not be enough room even for all the existing Deep Citizens.

And so the Deep Citizens created the ballot.

Moko and Arlyana did not stay to explore the First Chamber as they had the Sundome. It was one thing to see the sun and the surface it had

scoured of life; it was another to stand in the halls where the first ballot had been drawn.

On the morning of their fourth day, they were woken by a buzz at the door. Arlyana checked the video stream, sighed, and told Moko to stay in bed while she dealt with it.

Not knowing what else to do, he lay there staring at the ceiling with a view to getting back to sleep. That plan soon became impossible as he heard Arlyana's voice rising with emotion and he began to wonder what "it" was that needed dealing with. Another voice, deep and male, spoke in hushed tones.

Troubled by a dread that gripped tighter as Arlyana's voice became more strained, Moko decided that he could keep his promise to stay away from the door while keeping alert for Arlyana's safety by watching the video feed from the door. He tapped the screen and the picture flickered on; he quickly hit the mute button.

Arlyana was wrapped in her dressing gown, talking to a dark-eyed man who had dressed and groomed fastidiously, as if he were on his way to a funeral. In his hand he held a card or maybe an envelope and he was offering it to Arlyana while she adamantly refused to take it. As Arlyana become more animated, the man seemed to crumble from within. His shoulders dropped, his giving hand fell to his side.

Although Moko could make out nothing of the conversation, the volume rose to the point where occasional disconnected phrases from Arlyana filtered back to him. Moko rubbed his eyes to make sure he was seeing clearly. If anything, it was the stranger and not Arlyana who was likely to need his help.

The door slammed shut and Moko flicked off the video. Arlyana stormed back inside the unit, tossed off her gown, and crawled naked back into bed with Moko.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

The door buzzed in three staccato bursts.

"Ignore it," she said.

A few seconds later, there was another buzz at the door, then another, this time somehow sadder, and then the buzzer fell quiet. The silence stretched for a few seconds, then past a minute, then past three minutes. The door would not ring again. Arlyana wormed herself under Moko's arm

and began to breathe in shudders. Not knowing what to say, Moko said nothing, which was exactly right.

The Heritage Wall was an hour by train from Arlyana's quarters. They stepped out of the station into a low chamber, a mere twenty metres tall, but so long and straight that it seemed to be a continuation of the train tunnel that had brought them.

The southern wall of the chamber was a milled plane that followed a subtly saddled polynomial function. The curve of the wall had a strangely emotive property: it could reach into people and make them pause in awe. Along the wall, following the relief lines of the function, were dots of blood where people had pricked a finger and pressed it to the rock.

"My family has a patch here," said Moko. He led Arlyana into the cavern, past robotic curators that cleaned the cavern and sharpened the edges of etchings that had eroded, and showed her the cluster of blood spots from his ancestors.

"These stop about thirty years ago," she said, reading the dates etched under each blood print.

Moko shrugged. "Most of my family joined the Brethren of Light. I'm the only one left on Musca."

"You have no family here?"

"My closest relative, both genetically and spatially, is my brother. He's on a Brethren mission ship halfway to B right now. He's about fifty light-hours away."

"You don't seem very Brethren to me," said Arlyana with a touch of amusement in her voice.

"Well," said Moko, "my brother is very Brotherly. However, in spite of being a brother to my brother, I am not Brotherly at all."

Arlyana shook her head. "Was that supposed to make sense?"

"If you spend enough time around Brethren, yes. Now show me your family plot."

Arlyana led him to her family's cluster of blood prints. It was a large display that went back twelve generations. Moko was impressed.

"Do you think I should put my mark in your family's area?" he asked. "They don't even know I exist."

"Do you always worry so much about etiquette?" Arlyana asked. "You

do understand that being balloted gives you a certain degree of latitude?"

"It feels presumptuous to me."

Arlyana scoffed at him. "Since I'm not planning to put my own mark here, it's a moot point."

Moko waited for an explanation but Arlyana did not seem disposed to provide one. "Come on," she said. "We'll find our own place, miles from anyone else."

"Wait a moment," said Moko. Arlyana tried to draw him into moving on, but Moko refused. He was living with one Arlyana mystery already; he was not going to let her keep spinning away from him. He examined the blood spots carefully, reading the names, dates, and relationships etched into the rock beneath them.

"I think I've got it. Here," he said, pointing to a spattered blotch of crimson on the wall. "This is your sister's blood. Her name is Uldi. And underneath that is a girl's name, Caris, but no blood. The space has been set aside for a girl who has not been born yet. Your niece-to-be." He studied Arlyana's face; she was giving nothing away. He continued, "It makes you feel bad. You know it shouldn't. But you can't help it. She is about to be born and you've been balloted."

"Yes, you've got it. I don't like to admit it, but I'm resentful," said Arlyana.

"I didn't say resentful," said Moko.

"I did," she replied, then pulled him away by the arm.

They walked along the Heritage Wall until they found an area that was almost devoid of blood marks. Arlyana called over one of the curators, a thin robotic agent that introduced itself and asked what they would like etched beside their blood marks. They decided their names and a small bridge between them would be enough.

The curator robot pricked Moko's skin. Blood budded on the tip of his thumb. Moko pressed it to the rock face and the curator etched his name and the date around it. Arlyana offered her hand to the curator. She pressed her blood to the wall next to Moko's and watched as the curator finished etching.

As they rode the train back, Arlyana fell asleep on Moko's shoulder. Now that he had time to think, he could see that Arlyana had been too quick to agree with his guess, and had been far too blithe about it. It bothered him that Arlyana had spun some more mist about herself. For

someone who wanted to share terminal intimacies, she seemed paradoxically reluctant to let him understand her.

He ran through the names and dates in his mind, trying to reconstruct from memory Arlyana's family tree and the sequence of events. Something was amiss with the story he had intuited.

Moko brushed Arlyana's hair with his hand while she slept and wondered why she kept so many things to herself.

Moko said, "This looks terrible."

"Should I care how it looks?"

"People will say I only wanted you for the time you gave me."

"I want this more than I care what people think," said Arlyana.

So they went to the registry and signed away the difference in their ballots. Moko gained time and Arlyana lost time, but they would both live long enough for Moko to learn to climb.

They started with training walls, then worked their way up to boulders, then spouts, and finally to sheer walls. She taught him about ropes and anchors and how to belay, and over the following weeks he built up his strength and endurance.

Signing at the registry had another, quite unexpected, effect: Moko, who had more or less disappeared from his life, became traceable. Consequently, Arlyana was woken early one morning by a message marked maximum urgency.

She opened the message. A man with a shaved scalp and a slightly pinched mouth appeared on screen; he wore a Brethren tunic.

"My dear lady," said the man. "I apologize for sending a recorded message, but I am fifty light-hours away and cannot engage in responsive conversation. My name is Tarroux, and as you have may have guessed I am Moko's brother. I found you through the registry, and I apologize for intruding on you, but I have been trying to reach Moko with an extremely urgent message. It is imperative that he view the attachment as soon as possible. Before I finish, please allow me to thank you. When you signed your time over to Moko, you may have given him just enough to save himself from the ballot. I can't tell you how much this means." There the message ended.

Arlyana shook Moko awake and dragged his grogginess out of bed.

"You have to see this," she said. Once the message finished, she

touched the attachment and went to leave the room.

"Stay," said Moko.

"But it's private!"

"Stay!"

So they watched together as Tarroux, brother to Moko, spoke again.

"Moko," he said, "there is a place for you on the last Brethren mission ship. You know this will be the last ship to leave Musca. The sun is becoming too wild even for missionaries.

"I know we've been through this before, but I am hoping that the approaching ballot date will have changed how you feel about joining the Brethren.

"Please, brother, I love you and it breaks my heart knowing how easily you could be saved."

There was a stark jump-cut in the video stream. Tarroux had come back to the message and added a coda. The quality of the light had changed, the background was darker, and Tarroux looked as if he was being eaten from inside.

"Brother, I know I've asked you many times before and you've refused many times before, but please, please join the Brethren. I...I have never said this before, but I beg you to join the mission. Even if you don't believe, just say that you do. That's all you have to do. Just say you believe. I know, I know. It may be a lie. But with time spent among us, maybe you will come to see our truth. Even if you don't change, even if you never accept the Tenets, I will still have my brother."

At the end of the message, Arlyana turned off the screen.

"You turned down a place with the Brethren?" she asked, astonished. "You could have avoided the ballot?"

"Yes, I could have gone to the Brethren and lived a life that means nothing to me, full of empty rituals and prayers to forces I do not believe exist."

"*You would be alive,*" she said.

"Just like you, eh?"

The sudden non sequitur jarred Arlyana. "What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"You think I wouldn't figure out the story with you and your family? I know what happened. I know it was your sister who was balloted, not you. I know that you took over her ballot because she was pregnant. And

I know that your sister fell pregnant *after* she was balloted, which means that your unborn niece is not just a reminder of your impending mortality, *she is the reason for it*. And it's not your fetal niece you resent; it's your manipulative sister."

"You can't possibly know all that," Arlyana said angrily.

"All right, I don't *know* all that; I inferred it. Tell me I'm wrong and I'll take it all back."

"You can't possibly understand — "

"Tell me I'm wrong, then."

Arlyana said nothing, she just glared at him while an accusatory aura radiated from her.

 **CANTERBURY HOLLOW** was one of the great chambers that crowned their civilization: a wonder of engineering and of art, it had been carved in the shape of a cathedral window. Everyone came there when they died, for recycling. Here the bodies of the dead were committed to the huge bacterial vats that broke down flesh and bone and returned organics to the community.

It was their last day together. The train brought Arlyana and Moko to the base of the Sepulchral Tower, a bowed memorial to everyone who had ever lived and died in that underworld. Few visitors ever went deeper than the memorial park, but Arlyana and Moko were not there to mourn and so they walked past the Sepulchre and into the darker Hollow. The light dimmed as they went deeper: Here the brightness was only to be found where it was needed for the workers and machines of the Hollow to perform their daily tasks.

Arlyana took him to a ladder at the base of the western wall that stretched up into the gloom overhead.

"I did all that training to climb a ladder?" said Moko.

"This service ladder rises two hundred metres. After that, it's all our own work."

By the time they reached the top of the ladder, Moko's arms were aching. He wondered how he would manage the rest of the climb. Arlyana reassured him that it would be harder work from here, but slower and with plenty of time for his muscles to recover between exertions.

"The route we're taking is called Little Freya. It's long but easy, and it has plenty of anchor points that previous climbers have left behind. Over to the right there — " and she pointed to a series of vertical ridges forty metres away " — is Big Freya. It's a much, much harder climb. The record for free-climbing Big Freya is seven hours. I've free-climbed it in ten. Believe me, what we're doing is a cinch."

They took a rest break, then Arlyana looped a rope through a nearby anchor and started climbing. They took turns climbing, then belaying, climbing, then belaying. Their progress was slow but safe, and Moko found that the longer they climbed the more he became focussed on each motion, on balancing the needs of work and rest, on finding the most efficient body position to keep a hold without exhausting a muscle group. Arlyana watched over him, taking care not to push him too hard, nor to let him pause when they needed to push on.

Time seemed to shrink away. He stopped counting hours and minutes and began thinking in steps and grips, which formed movements, which formed phases.

They went around bluffs, over ridges, avoided overhangs, and followed the road up the rock face. As they ascended, the light became more tenuous. They donned collar lanterns and set them glowing.

Many hours later, they came to a small cavern that burrowed off the side of the Hollow. Arlyana helped Moko scramble over the lip and into the safety of the space inside. Once he had caught his breath, he looked out the cavern mouth. There was another hundred metres to the peak of Canterbury Hollow. He groaned. The muscles ached in his shoulders, back, and calves.

Arlyana smiled. "Don't worry. This is as far as we're going."

"But we're not at the top yet."

"This is better. Come and see."

She took his hand and led him into the cavern. The space opened up at the back and they could walk upright without hitting their heads. The light from their collar lanterns filled the small cavern. Hundreds of golden reflections shone back at them. The reflections came from ballot tags that had been hung from the roof. There were hundreds of them, maybe thousands.

Moko moved about, brushing the tags with his fingers and setting them swinging. "What is this place?" he asked.

"Where climbers come to die," Arlyana said. She hammered a bolt into the cavern roof and from it she hung her ballot tag. Moko took his own tag and chain from around his neck and hung it from the same bolt, then looped a knot in the two chains so that the tags dangled face to face.

"Come here," said Arlyana, and she started to undress.

Arlyana and Moko were two small primates who were members of a long, slow radiation from the horn of Africa. Their lives meant little except to each other and to a small number of people around them, but stepping back, their choices were part of a pattern of self-similarity echoed on many scales of magnitude. The forces that drove them to each other also drove the cycles of expansion and contraction in the civilization of Deep Citizens. It drove the population cycles of foxes and hares, and on a larger scale again, the cycle of ammonites and meteorites. This great engine of colonization and exploitation had pushed humanity outward but had also destroyed the biosphere of a third of all inhabited worlds.

Programmed death has dogged living creatures ever since deep, deep ancestors discovered the power of swapping genes. With the evolution of abstract intelligence, the tragedy of death became a folly. But without that folly, humans would never have made it across the Red Sea and there never would have lived a pair of bonded primates in the crust of a planet twenty-nine light-years from Earth.

Arlyana cut a small segment off their climbing rope and tied one end around her wrist and the other around Moko's so they would not be separated.

On the time scales that affect human consciousness they did not have long, but for twenty heartbeats they would be cradled by the forces of nature. Angels of gravity drew them an elegant parabola; angels of electricity allowed skin to touch and to feel the contact; angels of strong force held them intact; and angels of weak force bound them to their mutual asymmetries.

They walked to the lip of the cavern, held each other tight, and toppled into empty space. †

—for Albert C