



Planetfall

By Emma Newman

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From Emma Newman, the award-nominated author of *Between Two Thorns*, comes a novel of how one secret withheld to protect humanity's future might be its undoing...

Renata Ghali believed in Lee Suh-Mi's vision of a world far beyond Earth, calling to humanity. A planet promising to reveal the truth about our place in the cosmos, untainted by overpopulation, pollution, and war. Ren believed in that vision enough to give up everything to follow Suh-Mi into the unknown.

More than twenty-two years have passed since Ren and the rest of the faithful braved the starry abyss and established a colony at the base of an enigmatic alien structure where Suh-Mi has since resided, alone. All that time, Ren has worked hard as the colony's 3-D printer engineer, creating the tools necessary for human survival in an alien environment, and harboring a devastating secret.

Ren continues to perpetuate the lie forming the foundation of the colony for the good of her fellow colonists, despite the personal cost. Then a stranger appears, far too young to have been part of the first planetfall, a man who bears a remarkable resemblance to Suh-Mi.

The truth Ren has concealed since planetfall can no longer be hidden. And its revelation might tear the colony apart...

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Editorial Review

Review

“Cathartic and transcendent.”—*The New York Times*

"An exceptionally engaging novel that explores the complex relationship between mythology and science...Surprising plot turns and richly developed characters make for a vivid, riveting read."—*The Washington Post*

“I have been waiting for this book for a very long time. *Planetfall* is gripping, thoughtful science fiction in the vein of Tiptree or Crispin. Unique, timely, and enthralling...Emma Newman has crafted a story that turns inward on itself in a beautiful spiral; the written equivalent of the golden mean. Absolutely worth your time. Science fiction is meant to show us things about ourselves that we need to know. *Planetfall* is some of the finest sociological science fiction I have read since Tiptree... Absolutely beautiful. What a glorious, heartbreaking maze of a book.”—Sean McGuire, author of *A Red Rose Chain*

“Newman has crafted a thrilling tale of murder, mystery and madness on a world where humanity is still its own worst enemy. Horrifying and heartbreaking in equal measure, the catastrophe driving this narrative will keep you riveted until the very last page. Don’t miss this one.”—Kameron Hurley, author of *The Mirror Empire*

"A fascinating and propulsive tale about what could happen when actual humans try to settle a planet and about how little protection technology can really offer in the face of our inherent weaknesses."—*Locus*

“Incredibly well-realized world building...Thrilling.”—io9.com

“Builds and builds to this remarkable crescendo...The ending had me breathless...an awesome book.”—Roxane Gay, author of *An Untamed State*

“Think *Interstellar*, think *Prometheus*. We have a destiny waiting for us among the stars, and now it's calling to us. A great genre debut, and beautifully written: an unfolding alien mystery, and complex, utterly believable characters. You will want to believe.”—Stephen Baxter, National Bestselling Author of *Ultima*

“Filled with wonders, revelations, and edge-of-the-seat suspense, *Planetfall* is a fascinating, heartbreaking exploration of love and loneliness set against an awe-inspiring backdrop. An instant classic of the genre.”—Gareth L. Powell, BSFA Award-winning author of *Ack-Ack Macaque*

“A strange but mesmerizing book in which almost nothing is as it seems...Re-reads at once like a character study, a mystery, a hard science-fiction tale about the colonists on an alien world, and a surrealist science fiction about alien life. Above all, this is a novel about the price of secrets.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“This heartbreaking adventure is a tragedy of science and faith...[Newman] carefully manages her pacing until events make each revelation as inevitable as it is destructive.”—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Emma Newman is an author and a professional audiobook narrator, narrating short stories and novels in all genres. She also co-writes and hosts the Hugo nominated podcast “Tea and Jeopardy” which involves tea, cake, mild peril and singing chickens.

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About the Author

1

EVERY TIME I come down here I think about my mother. I don't want to; it just happens. My brain has decided it's a critical subroutine that must be executed when the correct variables are in place: (when time = predawn) + (when physical location = beneath the colony) + (when physical act = opening the door to the

Masher) run “unpleasant memory of mother #345.”

My hand is pushing the door open and I’m back at my old lab and she’s following me in, her heels clicking on the tiled floor. I’ve prepped the equipment to run one hour before her arrival so there’s something to show straightaway. She never was a patient woman.

“Is that a printer?” she asked, and I nodded. It started then—I know it now that I’m looking back—that tightening of my gut as I dared to hope I might impress her.

“Yeah.” I smiled.

She didn’t. “Like the one I have at home?”

“Better.”

“What’s it printing?”

“My latest work.”

She went up to the plasglass and peered through, seeing nothing but a few millimeters of tissue. She turned to me with her nose slightly wrinkled. “What is it printing?”

“A new pancreas,” I said. “For Dad.”

“Oh.” She’d hoped I was making something she could hang up in the hallway of her inert home. “I didn’t realize you were involved in this sort of thing. I’ve seen it on the news.”

And that was the moment I knew I’d been stupid to hope for anything. “The gene therapy isn’t working out for him. There’s an unusual base pair sequence in the—”

“Renata—” She holds up her hand. “You know I don’t understand this kind of thing.” The hand lowers to rest over her heart. “I’m an artist.”

I wanted to say that my colleague had called me that when he saw the final model I’d compiled for the print. I wanted to ask her why she wasn’t even the tiniest bit worried about Dad’s cancer. They were married once; surely an echo of something remained. But all I said was, “I’m making him a new pancreas with cells cultured from a cheek swab and it’s actually fucking cool. I’m going to save his life. And thousands of other people who can’t—”

“I don’t think it’s right.”

“How can it be wrong to save a life?”

“Where does it stop? Making a person? Making copies?”

“Actually, they’ve already locked down the ethics on that, after the guy over at Princeton—”

“It’s going too far, all this science. Where’s the beauty? Where is God in all of this?”

“Everywhere,” I whispered. “Especially here.”

She didn’t hear me.

This is where I take a deep breath and look at the Masher instead of the lab in my past. I run a hand over the alloy and rub my fingers together. I know from patching into the environmental sensors and the color of the walls that the humidity levels are within satisfactory parameters, but I still do it. The alloy is the same gray-blue as my mother's eyes. That must be the memory trigger. I used to wish I'd inherited them, but thank the Lord I didn't. I wouldn't want to see my mother's eyes looking back at me in the mirror. I have my father's dark brown eyes and his tight curly hair and his flat nose. It was genetically inevitable, but it was still a disappointment to her. It's obvious in the postbirth footage I lifted from the family server. It's the only time you see her. Days later she was the one doing all the filming. Drawn back. Getting the composition right, one step removed from her own retinal cam.

I walk from one end of the Masher to the other, peering through the plasglass at the sorted discards from the homes above instead of human tissue. I feel just as excited now as I did back then.

"What have you got inside you today, Mash?" I ask. I don't know why; there's no voice recognition or synthware or any kind of UI. There's no point; the sorter is the only part with any AI and it's not that clever. It doesn't need to be to sort materials.

In the ceramics section an interesting curve in the collected pile catches my eye. I press the nubbin at the bottom corner of the door and it slides open. It's a vase, I think, the design riffing off a Möbius strip aesthetic. The bacteria are destroyed by the household chute on the way down, so I know it's sterile and safe to take out.

I turn it over a few times and rub my thumb over the shiny white surface. It tells me two things right away: the creator is a learner—they always want to play with Möbius strips when they get to a certain phase of the CAD training program—and their printer is going to break down soon. The imperfections in the surface are obvious to me; if it were my printer it'd be stripped down and cleaned right away, but these people don't notice the signs. They know I'll turn up and fix it when it breaks and that's enough for everyone. Except the Ringmaster.

Even though the design is crude and the vase flawed, I rescue it from its fate. Someone with the potential to be a good visengineer tried so hard to make it an interesting shape. I need something to remind me there are still people creating for the love of it. I put it on top of the unit and rummage through the rest of the abandoned ceramics, but nothing takes my fancy, so I slide the door shut and move on to the plastics compartment. I've had time only to open its door when a message marked "urgent" arrives for me.

I don't even question who it is from; only the Ringmaster has manners bad enough to tag any message that way. I decline voice contact—the acoustics would give away my location—and indicate that I'll accept only text. He'll think I'm on the toilet or having a shower. The only other times most people accept text-only is if they're making love with someone boring, and he knows there's no chance of that.

Ren—come to the west gate. Now.

I close the Masher compartment, actually interested. What's Mack doing there? He never goes to the western edge of the colony.

With a simple thought command, a virtual keyboard appears in front of me, overlaid across my visual field. What's going on? I type back.

Someone's coming.

What's that supposed to mean? You want to have a meeting at the west gate?

No. Someone's coming *toward* the colony. From outside.

The v-keyboard disappears, my implant thinking it's not needed anymore when the words fly from my brain and I stand there, motionless, too stumped by what he's sent to respond.

Ren? What are you doing? Come now!

I think of the Masher and call up the menu, starting the machine off as I struggle to process what he's said. I watch as the contents on the other side of the plasglass are rendered into the base powders they were printed from. By the time the last specks of it all have been sucked back into the communal feeds, the Ringmaster has sent three more messages and is starting to swear. He never swears.

Abusing my privileges, I access the cloud and look up what patterns he's downloaded in the past twenty-six hours. When I see the one for the automatic pistol delivered to his home printer less than twenty minutes ago, my mouth goes dry.

I call up the v-keyboard again. Sorry. Getting dressed. On my way.

I can't help but speculate about what it means. The only other people on the planet were never supposed to come here. And as soon as I think that, my heart races and I feel sick and I want to go home and curl up and not go outside for a week.

But I can't give in to that impulse right now. I focus on walking up the slope toward the exit, forcing my mind to imagine going to the western gate. The thought of crossing the streets, of walking past homes and people looking out at me hurrying past, sweating and shaking, makes me feel worse. Why call me there? What does he want me to do? He's already printed the solution.

The hatch down to the Masher's hub is only a couple of meters from my home. At least if he's looking out for me, I'll come from the right direction. A few early risers might be mooching around inside their pods, but it's too early to be outside and social. The hatch drops back into place and locks automatically, the seam between it and the path already fading as the gap is filled by the repair cells already growing.

It's cool, with a gentle breeze, and if I try hard enough I can imagine it's the edge of Paris in late April. I keep my head down and look at the crystal beneath my feet. I think about when Pasha grew this path, when we debated the most efficient mechanisms to make it durable but not slippery when wet. I remember printing the lattice underneath that he used as a base to train the crystal and keep it exactly where we wanted it. I remember the arguments over the color it should be and that twat whose name I can never recall asking if we could engineer it to look like it was made of yellow bricks. I had to look that up on the cloud. He was a pop culture historian and that was his contribution to the colony aesthetic? Why did the Ringmaster approve his place on the ship?

And then I see it: the western gate. Nothing more than a couple of symbolic pillars designed by Pasha's wife, Neela. I like her style; it's simple and elegant. I helped her to print them, but she thought them up. She liked the freedom given by the fact that no one cared about them on that side of our settlement; it was the side farthest away from God's city.

Mack is standing there, the only other person out and about at this time, looking away from the colony. I can see the mountains in the distance and the vast plains between. The figure he's watching is probably half a kilometer away, hunched over and moving slowly. The landscape is still relatively wild beyond the gate, with long grasslike plants.

“Do you know who it is?” I ask as I approach, more to signal that I’m there than anything else.

“A man, in his early twenties or so,” he replies. “The proximity alarm woke me up. I thought it was an animal.”

The man is staggering toward the colony. “Is he sick?”

“No obvious symptoms. Look for yourself.”

I shake my head. “I disabled the zoom in my lens. It gives me migraines and—”

“He must be from the others,” he says, not interested in me and my nervous babbling. “One of their kids. He must have walked for weeks.”

My palms are slick with sweat and I want to go home. “What do you want me to do?”

He turns and looks at me for the first time, a slight twitch around his left eye indicating he’s switching to normal focal range. He’s looking haggard with the stress of it all. Mack hates the unexpected almost as much as I do, but his clothes are smart, his black hair tidy and his beard neat. He has to present himself at his best, even when he thinks there’s just an animal to scare off the boundary.

“Do you think we should shoot him?” he asks, looking down at the gun resting on his palm, like a child he was holding has just crapped in his hand.

“Why are you asking me that? Why not Zara? Or Nabiha or Ben? They—”

“Because you were there.”

I close my eyes and I think about the vase I left on top of the Masher. I think about whose printer is likely to break down next and remind myself not to mention that I knew it was going to happen; otherwise—

“Ren. What if he’s here to ruin everything we’ve done here?”

“We’ve done?” It comes out like a croak.

“Yes, *we*.” His voice hardens. “Should I shoot him and make sure he—”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Mack, I’m an engineer! Not your conscience!”

His mouth drops open at my outburst and I regret the words. He just doesn’t want to be the only load-bearing object in this messy structure.

“I haven’t got any binoculars,” I say in the calmest voice I can muster. “Look at him again and tell me what he’s carrying.”

“A pack, not a big one,” he replies after a few moments of scrutiny.

“Any sign of a gun?”

“No.”

“Any bulges around his midriff?”

“What, like growths or—”

“Like explosives,” I reply and he grimaces before looking back at him. “They wouldn’t have the tech for anything more subtle than something they could make from—”

“Nothing like that,” Mack cuts me off again.

“Does he look . . . I don’t know . . . angry?”

Mack shakes his head. “He looks desperate. Oh, look at him.”

The young man is waving both arms, like one lost at sea when sighting a chance of rescue. Mack looks at me, and when our eyes meet, we both know we can’t kill him.

“Shit,” I say and he nods. “Come on, then—let’s go bring him in. If we’re quick, we’ll get him to your house before anyone notices.”

2

I HAVEN’T GONE out of this gate for a long time. There’s nothing on this side of the colony that interests me and the sensor net maintains itself. There are animals that range nearby sometimes, but they tend not to come any closer than the edge of the zone monitored by the long-range sensors. I agree with Kay’s theory that God’s city emits something that keeps them away, but she’s still looking into it all these years later. Like all of us, she gets distracted by other experiments. It’s low priority.

“What do we say to him?” Mack asks, dragging my focus back to the young man.

“I was going to start with hello and then see how it goes,” I reply. I’m trying to sound light and relaxed because I don’t want to push the magma chamber of unspoken shit into an eruption. I’m barely handling it as it is.

“He must have been born after Planetfall,” he says, his pace fast but steady. “He doesn’t look old enough to have been born on the ship and there weren’t any babies in their pods.”

“Small mercies,” I whisper and thankfully he doesn’t hear. When I glance at him to check whether he’s looking pissed off at me, I see the sweat on his forehead and how white his lips are against the black of his beard. “Are you sure he’s alone?”

He looks at me like I’m an idiot. “I checked that.”

“But you didn’t see him coming.”

“I haven’t checked on them for a long time. I thought . . .”

He doesn’t finish the sentence, but the unspoken half lingers between us. We thought they were dead. We thought we had killed them.

The urge to turn around and go home and tell everyone to fuck off until it’s all over bears down on me. I can feel guilt and fear and ten thousand questions I’ve asked myself since Planetfall rising up with the contents of my stomach and I want all of it to stay deep down where it should be.

“We stick to the story,” he says with the firm edge in his voice that means he’s made up his mind and it’s not up for discussion.

“But he’ll know what really happened.”

“Stick to the story,” Mack says again and I don’t have anything else to say. There are too many unknown variables to make any useful predictions and I try not to speculate these days. “Let me do the talking,” he adds.

As if I wouldn’t do that anyway. He’s the Ringmaster. He knows what to say to the crowd and to the latecomer without a ticket. I just maintain the rigging and make sure the tent doesn’t collapse on us all.

The sky is now the same deep blue as that of a Mediterranean summer and when I look straight up and see a couple of clouds I can almost believe I’m on Earth again, like my brain cannot help but return to its default setting. Ahead of us the highest mountain nearby, dubbed Diamond Peak by the more romantic members of the colony, will soon be tipped by the sun rising over that exact point. They have a silhouette reminiscent of the Alps. It’s only when I look at the details here—the way the seeds are shaped on the grasses we’re walking through, the slight sparkle of the silicates in the soil beneath our feet that give it a magical quality and the hard shells of unfamiliar creatures tucked between the stalks—that I remember we’re so far from home.

The stranger has sunk to his knees, the exhaustion setting in now that he knows we’re coming to him. As we pick up the pace, he falls forward onto his hands, his black hair hanging straight. I can see his pack now. It’s a basic design from the survival pattern folder on the local server of each of the Planetfall pods. It has a built-in water filtration mechanism and a more primitive version of the porous fabric we use on houses in the colony, designed to absorb water and push it, via an osmotic mechanism, to the internal filter. He’s probably been living off dew and rainwater for the whole journey—and his own urine, if he had any sense in the dry spells. I have no idea what he would have done for food; there are gels designed to produce fast-growing fungi but not enough packs to sustain such a trip.

He’s thin and his clothes are worn and patched in several places. We knew their printers would fail, and without access to the cloud they had no way to run complex diagnostics. None of the people in that group were printer specialists and so unlikely to have any specs or spare-part patterns on their personal servers. The clothes he’s wearing are basic survival patterns designed to be durable and breathable with a sensor net built into them designed to help the body’s homeostatic system in adverse conditions. The built-in transmitter must have failed; otherwise it would have pinged our network when he was five kilometers away.

Mack and I break into a run when he collapses, disappearing in the tall reed-thin plants. While we run, I check the network to see who’s awake and whether there’s any talk of Mack and me leaving the gate, but no one seems to have noticed. The sun is rising and in a couple of hours the air will be teeming with insects. I don’t have any protective clothing nor repellents on me and I wonder how this man survived without them.

I half expect him to be dead by the time we get to him, but the pack is rising up and down and his head is turned to the side. I think of the parasites and organisms in the dirt only millimeters from his mouth and nose and the millions of microscopic assailants he can’t possibly be protected against.

“We’re here,” Mack says as we stop and kneel down on either side of him. “You’re going to be all right.”

“Hi,” the young man says with a slight American accent as he struggles onto his hands and knees to tip back and rest with his backside on his heels. He sweeps his hair off his face and both Mack and I gawk at him.

He looks like Suh. He looks like the Pathfinder.

I can see her in his eyes, his lips, the shape of his chin and cheekbones. The genetic signature of her Korean heritage is written across him and I want to laugh and cry and kiss him a million times and hide my face with shame. He is an echo of her beauty. He smiles at me uncertainly and I see her again that day at the observatory, holding the piece of paper in her hands.

“Holy crap,” she said and held it out to me. “It’s real. It’s a real thing. It’s . . . it’s a real place.”

I took it and scanned the numbers, but astronomy wasn’t in my repertoire. Then I noticed a string of numbers that were more than familiar—just the sight of them made me feel nauseous. They were the first things she wrote when she woke from her coma, before she even spoke or asked where she was or why she was in the hospital.

“It’s a place, Ren. There’s a planet in the exact location the numbers describe.” She laughed, the first time she’d laughed since the day she wrote them down. “Isn’t it wonderful? We know what it means now!”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think we do.”

All these years later, this stranger has tears in his eyes too. “I knew it wasn’t true,” he says. “I knew it was real and I knew you wouldn’t kill me.”

Mack is speechless for the first time in the forty-odd years I’ve known him.

“Of course we’re not going to kill you,” I say.

“My name is Lee Sung-Soo.” He grasps my hand tightly and I can’t help but squeeze back. “My grandmother was the Pathfinder.”

I want to take a moment to let it sink in, but Mack is obviously struggling and I need to make this boy think everything’s all right. “I’m Ren—Renata Ghali—and this is Cillian Mackenzie, but we all call him Mack.”

He smiles at me—I want him to never stop and I want to never see it again, all at once—and then he looks at Mack, who musters one of his warmest smiles as he shakes Sung-Soo by the hand.

“How did you find us?” Mack asks.

“The planet’s topography was on one of the pod servers,” he replies. “I pieced together some of the things my parents said and worked it out.”

“What did they say?” Mack is trying not to look terrified. I’ve known him too long to be fooled though. That clench in his jaw says it all.

“About the mountain and the plain below it, the things the Pathfinder saw before we got here.” His gaze shifts to focus behind us. “That’s it, isn’t it? That’s God’s city.”

I nod. “Not the bit at the bottom—that’s the colony—but the rest is.”

“It’s . . . amazing,” he says and then laughs. “That sounds so stupid. They said it was all a lie, but here I am looking at it!”

“Where are the rest of the people who . . .” Mack doesn’t know how to describe them.

Sung-Soo's eyes lose their joy. "They died. I'm the only one left."

Mack takes the pack from his shoulders and puts it on his own back; then we both take an arm, wrap it over our shoulders and hoist him up between us. There's barely any weight to him at all.

We head back toward the colony, and I can't help but look up at God's city, just like Sung-Soo does but with less wonder. I'm used to it now, but it still draws my eyes up.

It stretches above the colony like a huge forest of ancient baobab trees tangled around one another, forming an organic citadel. The outer membranes of the structure are black, to absorb the most sunlight, and at this time in the morning the nodules at the top of the structure are spherical.

"It changes with the weather," I tell him as he walks between us. "When it gets hot, the nodules in the upper levels grow tendrils and look a bit like dendritic cells. It increases the surface area to—"

"To manage the heat," he says, nodding. "My father taught me some of my grandma's knowledge."

Mack's silence feels like a fourth person stalking us through the grasses.

"We'll take you to Mack's place," I say. "To check you over and let you rest."

"Thank you. Can I stay? There's nothing to go back to. There was a storm . . ."

I glance at Mack. He's staring up at the top of the city and doesn't notice. I know where his mind is. I don't want to go there. "Of course you can. Right, Mack?"

He snaps his head to look at me. "What?"

"Sung-Soo can stay, can't he?"

"I don't have any objections," he says diplomatically. "But you must understand, we have to speak to the rest of the colony and give them the chance to ask questions and voice any concerns."

Sung-Soo nods. "Very fair. I can hunt and I can carve well and I'm strong, when I'm rested."

Hunting and carving? Such primitive words. I slip my hand down to hold his and feel for calluses. When I find them, I'm relieved, but why? Did I think he was lying? What else could they have done to survive?

"It's going to be fine," I say, and Sung-Soo smiles as if I meant the words for him.

3

MACK IS GRADUALLY steering us in a different direction for the return journey so we'll go around the outside of the colony and enter at the north gate, right next to his place.

We're silent as we trudge through the grasses, Sung-Soo exhausted and malnourished, Mack and I trapped in our own little spirals of guilt and dread. He's taking us on a route that makes it far less likely we'll be spotted, but there's still a chance. He's probably trying to work out what to tell everyone else and buying time to figure that out at his own pace.

I'm trying to make something more like a mental flowchart out of the tangled mess of what-ifs and thens in

my mind. I give up. We've learned so many times that, no matter how carefully we plan, something unpredictable will destabilize the system.

The northern gate is again just a couple of pillars, but more ornately designed than the western one. There are stylized plants and flowers intertwined with overly fussy representations of the skeletal structures that form the frames of our houses. I think it's a bit childish and overdone as a representation of our aspirations to live as sustainably and naturally as we can, but the majority liked it. I think "majority" is one of my least favorite words. It's so often used to justify bad decisions.

Mack's place is based upon one of the round designs, looking like an igloo with spokes coming out of it to end in half-submerged bubbles. We're experimenting with a new membrane on the outside of the central hemisphere and it's looking good; several of the native species we've planted on it are thriving.

Half of the structure is aboveground, the rest submerged below. As Mack touches the patch to the right of the door I can't help but check on the transition between above – and belowground. Some of the earlier experiments with the new coating resulted in unexpected interactions with the soil, but this variant seems okay.

"Are those . . . fish?" Sung-Soo points at one of the windows.

"Yes," I say, refreshed by his wonder at the things I barely notice now. "We harvest energy from sunlight using the aquarium algae. Some of the other houses do that through the outer skin—" I wave a hand at some of them. "But Mack likes fish."

The door opens and its motion makes Sung-Soo dig his heels in a little. "Is it . . . alive?" he asks, staring at its edges compressed against the door frame.

"Sort of," I answer. "It's based on a heart valve, loosely speaking."

He lifts his arm from my shoulder; I let go of his hand so he can brush the structure with his fingertips. "What is it made of?"

"A composite organic material, a bit like cartilage."

"Come inside," Mack says, eager to get him out of sight.

The door sighs shut behind us and the lights come on, bathing the main living area in the daylight spectrum. There are familiar comfy chairs and the central sunken fireplace for when Mack wants some primal reassurance given by control over fire. I'm drawn to the antique orrery displayed above the nook housing his home printer, the only trinket he brought from Earth.

Sung-Soo watches the walls change color as they react to the carbon dioxide we're exhaling, shifting from pale blue to a warm peach.

"House: privacy," Mack says and the inner glass of the aquariums turns opaque.

"Have you got a health kit handy or shall I print one?" I ask as Mack guides Sung-Soo to one of the chairs.

"I've got one in the other room."

"I'll make your chair dirty," Sung-Soo says and Mack shakes his head at him.

"It cleans itself; it's fine. Don't worry about a thing." He goes off to his bedroom and I note he takes Sung-Soo's pack with him.

"What's that for?" Sung-Soo asks, pointing at the large bowl-shaped impression at the center of the room.

"It's a fire pit," I say and he nods.

"That I understand."

"We don't need them for warmth; the house maintains whatever temperature we want. Lots of us feel comforted by a fire, that's all. Would you like me to light one?"

He shakes his head. "I'm warm enough, thanks." He reaches down to brush the carpet. "Is this a plant?"

I nod. "A kind of moss. It's part of the house's ecosystem."

Mack returns with the small case and I reach for it. He passes it over after a moment's pause, realizing that I want to do the assessment. It's not that I don't trust Mack. I just want to be sure it's done properly.

I run the roller over Sung-Soo's forehead and down the right side of his cheek. Normal temperature so no infection. A good start.

"I'm going to take a blood sample. It won't hurt. It's the fastest way to see how well you are."

He just nods and rolls up his sleeve. "I've had them before."

I take the penlike syringe from the case and press the blunt tip against his arm. The display at the end of the "pen" helps me locate the vein and numbs the skin there. I click the button at the side and the needle goes in, filling the internal vial with his blood. When it's full, the needle withdraws and the device deposits a tiny bit of skin sealant. When the display goes green, I lift it off his skin and place the pen into the analyzer part of the case.

"I'd like to extract your DNA," I say, adhering to ethics even though Mack is standing behind him with his finger over his mouth. "I'm sorry . . . You do know what that is, don't you?"

Sung-Soo raises an eyebrow. "Of course I do."

"Sorry." It's hard to know what they taught him.

"What do you want with my DNA?"

"Well, everyone in the colony has their genome on file, so it's easy for the colony medical program to recommend treatment or referral to a specialist." I glance up at Mack, who's frowning at me now. He's too tense and he'll give something away if he's not careful. He's lucky I know how to put on a show. "I'm curious too. I don't understand how you survived, to be honest. Did your . . . group develop anything to help you adapt to the environment here?"

He shakes his head. "No. A lot of us died. My father thought it was because of allergens, but none of them knew enough to be able to do anything about it."

His father was a linguist. That was why he was with us that day. I can't look at Sung-Soo, so I busy myself with the analyzer even though it's already doing what it should.

“And I don’t mind about the DNA,” he adds with a smile. “Thank you for asking me first.”

I add the command to do a full genome extraction from the sample. “It’ll take a little while for the information to compile and for me to have a proper look at it.”

“Are you a geneticist?”

I nod. “And an engineer. That’s what I trained in first. They work well together.” A gentle beep from the unit tells me the first set of results is through. As I examine the data, Mack comes and sits down across from Sung-Soo.

“Can you tell us more about what happened to your group after Planetfall?” he asks. “We would have looked for them if we thought they’d survived.”

Careful, Mack, I think, hiding my concern by keeping my eyes on the display.

“They all had different stories,” Sung-Soo replies. “My father lived longer than my mother and he told me that half of them went mad before I was even born. Some killed themselves; some died from reactions to stuff like plants or things in the air. There were a lot of deaths. Especially of the babies.”

I hear Mack swallow.

“He said the Pathfinder was wrong. There was no God, no city, nothing here. He said she was mad and they didn’t want to be part of her colony and live her lies. So they ran away.”

There’s a tremble in his voice and his eyes are filled with anger.

“He lied to me though. I never believed him. I couldn’t believe my grandmother would do such amazing things and it all turn out to be crap.”

“What else did he say about the Pathfinder?” Mack presses. I want to leave and the strain of fighting that urge is giving me a headache.

Sung-Soo is silent for a few moments. “He . . . he said she was dead.” Now he looks tearful. “I’ve been too afraid to ask. Is that true? Is she dead?”

“No!” Mack says cheerily and pats his knee. “She’s in God’s city, communing with the creator.”

Sung-Soo’s face is happiness and relief incarnate. “Can I see her?”

Mack shakes his head. “None of us can, I’m afraid, but once a year she sends us a message. The next one is due in a few days. You’re just in time!”

I don’t think Sung-Soo knows how to process the news. His expression fluctuates between hope and sadness. “Why only messages?”

“Because God hasn’t finished with her yet. When the time is right, when we are ready as well as her, she’ll be returned to us.”

How many times have I heard him say that? This time it makes me want to scream. But I push it down, as I always do. Better this way. Better for everyone.

“You’ve got a slight electrolyte imbalance and you’re malnourished but not dangerously so,” I report, eager to change the focus of the conversation. “That’s no surprise really. Mack, I’ve sent a request from the health kit to your kitchen to make him a shake to help replace some of the nutrients.” I look back at Sung-Soo. “It won’t take long. You need rest and a few good meals and you’ll feel a lot better. It’s incredible, really.”

“How did you survive?” Mack asks.

Sung-Soo smiles. “I know what I can and can’t eat here. Don’t you?”

“Well . . . yes,” I reply. “But only because we could test things first.”

“So did we. Sometimes it didn’t end well.”

I’m desperate to analyze his genome. There has to be something in him that’s adapted, but to do so in one generation? It seems . . . incredible.

“We had a lot of problems with allergies in the early days here,” I say. “We knew we would, and took precautions, but we couldn’t live in environmental suits forever. We managed to engineer retroviruses that modified our DNA to handle the new microbes and allergens here. We’re modifying it all the time, of course, and sometimes we’re caught out, but we haven’t lost anyone yet.” Sung-Soo says nothing and I worry I’ve sounded smug. “So, what I’m trying to say is that once I understand your genome, I can make sure you’re properly optimized for survival here.”

“More than I am already?”

“Yes.”

“I was sick a lot when I was a kid,” he says. “But at least I survived.”

“How old are you?” I ask.

“I think I’m twenty-two.”

“Your mother was pregnant in the Planetfall year?” Mack sounds appalled. He doesn’t want to think there was a pregnant woman aboard. Stupid man, there wasn’t one; we’d have known. Sung-Soo would have been conceived after Planetfall.

The three of us fall silent then. “How old are you?” Sung-Soo asks me.

“Nearly seventy,” I say and watch his eyes widen. “I know I don’t look it. We’ve been working on some interesting things here.”

“You said something about a storm,” Mack says before he has to reveal how bloody old he is. He’s so vain.

Sung-Soo looks past us into the fire pit. “It hit when we were moving the camp to avoid the floods that came every year. We didn’t realize how bad it was going to be.” He stops and covers his face.

“Your shake is ready, Mack,” a synthvoice calls from the kitchen and Mack goes to collect it.

I don’t know whether to rest a hand on the poor boy’s shoulder or just leave him to it. I’ve never been very good at this sort of thing.

"I lost everyone there. Do I have to talk about it?" he asks.

"No, no, of course not," I say, not wanting to make him suffer any more than he must have already.

Mack returns with a tall glass filled with the shake. I drink a lot of them. They're surprisingly satisfying. Sung-Soo takes a hesitant sip and then comes to the same conclusion.

He downs the contents and hands the glass back to Mack with a smile. In moments his head tips back and he slumps out cold.

I lurch forward to take his pulse, but Mack grabs my wrist.

"I gave him a sedative," he says. "He'll be fine."

"What did you do that for?"

"We need to talk about what we do next. You don't believe him, do you?"

I stand and move away to the window. Mack joins me. Faint shadows of fish cross his features as I try to fathom what he's suspicious of.

"Which part don't you believe?" I ask.

"You know how angry his father was! He said he was going to tell everyone when we completed Planetfall. Do you really think he didn't tell his own son?"

"He must have changed his mind," I reply, watching Sung-Soo's chest rise up and down slowly, fearful he'll wake and hear us. "What did you give him?"

"The same stuff that knocks me out for eight hours," Mack replies. He can't remember the drug's name.

Paranoid, I hurry over to Sung-Soo and check he really is unconscious. Mack can be an idiot sometimes; there was no guarantee that the drug would have the same effect on a boy who survived everything this planet's biomass had to throw at him. When I'm satisfied he is asleep, I return to Mack. "Maybe he didn't want his son growing up knowing the truth. It's about as shitty as the truth comes, after all."

Mack stares at the boy. "You trust him?"

I shrug, remembering how I felt after discovering the calluses on his hands. "I don't know. All I do know is that if we throw him out of the colony, or some other despicable thing, I'll never forgive myself. Or you, for that matter. Let's give him the benefit of the doubt. He's Suh's grandson, for fuck's sake!"

"Tell me what comes of the genetic analysis," he says, capitulating. "I'll let him sleep it off, then help him clean up and I'll think of a way to break the news."

"He'll need somewhere to live."

"He can stay with me while a place is built. I have room," he offers.

I'm relieved. "I'll be back when I have some answers," I say, and after one last look at Sung-Soo I take the health kit and leave Mack to it.

I HATE FEELING this way. As I walk away from Mack's place I can feel that horrible fluttering in my chest like a swarm of flies is trapped behind my ribs. I used to dream about them inside my chest, laying eggs in my heart and the maggots chewing their way through it until my chest burst open. The only thing that drowned out their buzz was my screams as I woke. I haven't had that nightmare for a long time. I fear that will change now.

I try to focus on the health kit's tiny orange light indicating the analyzer is still at work, to think about an improvement to the membrane I'm testing on the outside of my house, to focus on the feeling of my toes inside my shoes and the sound of the soles against the crystal path, but nothing calms the swarm. Something terrible is going to happen. I need to go home. I need to—

"Ren, is Mack okay?"

Nick's voice makes me cry out and I nearly drop the kit. I clutch it to my stomach as he approaches. He looks concerned, but also excited. Something unusual is happening and he thrives on being the first on the scene.

"Mack?"

He's looking at the health kit. "I saw someone help you carry him into his house. Is he hurt?"

Either he caught the briefest glimpse of the back of us or he's trying to trick me into lying. I can't handle this. I don't know what to say.

Now he's frowning. I'm not usually caught out so easily. I haven't had a chance to get my head straight.

"He . . ." I look at the kit to avoid his eyes. He means well, I remind myself. He doesn't realize I find his interest irritating. He probably believes he's being personable and caring about the community. I think he's overcompensating.

Then I feel guilty. I've defended Nick so many times when people have grumbled about him. In the early days of the project so many people treated him so badly I felt shocked to the core. It made me realize I lived in a bubble, a world where all the people I interacted with every day were highly intelligent and accepting and had evolved past so much of the bullshit that still plagued swathes of society. When Nick arrived, having bought his place with an obscene amount of money, these highly intelligent people treated him with sneering disdain and open hostility. It reminded me that we're still apes. Still evolving.

"Is it bad?" he asks with a hushed voice and takes a step closer.

Don't touch me, I think as he reaches a hand toward my shoulder.

"It's—"

A sound behind me makes him look past my face and his hand drops to his side. I see confusion in his expression and twist to see Mack hurrying out of his house. Shit.

Mack's head is down and he's marching swiftly toward the central Dome with his hands in his pockets, whispering to himself. I check the network and see his status as "busy—private." He's either having a private conversation with someone else or dictating a message. He prefers to use voice rather than the v-keyboard. He laughs at me when I use mine, saying I look like a poor mime trying to look like I'm playing the piano. I

never rise to the bait though. It may look stupid but at least people can't lip-read or listen in. There are at least a hundred or so people in the colony with augmented hearing good enough to eavesdrop on him now if they chose to. Luckily Nick isn't one of them.

"Oh, he seems fine," Nick says and looks at me pointedly. He wants to know who the third person was.

"Yeah, Mack's okay," I say.

Why is he going to the Dome? He goes there only for group meetings and there are none scheduled for today. As soon as I think that, I get an icon in the top right of my field of vision asking if I want to check.

"Ren, what's going on?"

With a glance to the upper right I select the option and the schedule appears to float over Nick's jacket. There's a new entry. But before I have a chance to check it, an urgent message arrives, the icon for that larger and flashing in the way I find so annoying. Nick looks away and I suspect he's got one too.

I open it. Obviously from Mack. I didn't anticipate the content though, nor the fact that he's sent it to every member of the colony.

Fellow citizens, I apologize for the hour and the urgent tag but there's a need for a colony-wide discussion of an event that occurred this morning. It seems there were survivors of the tragic accident that happened during Planetfall. The child of one of those survivors has made it to us and has asked to live with us at the foot of God's city.

The envelope icon has started to flash in the corner of my vision. It does that only when there are more than ten unopened messages.

That child is Lee Suh-Mi's grandson. His name is Lee Sung-Soo.

"God in his mercy!" Nick exclaims moments later. He must be at the same part as me.

If you have any concerns about Sung-Soo, or objections to his joining us, I want you to follow the protocol for any colony-wide issue, namely contacting your group leader, who will bring them to the council meeting I've scheduled in ten minutes. Apologies for not giving more notice, but this is just as unexpected for me as it is for you and I think it's imperative we deal with any concerns as soon as possible, for Sung-Soo's sake. The meeting will be open on the public stream and the public tag for this topic is "Newcomer." Sung-Soo is not connected to our network.

A flash appears bottom right, indicating a new trending tag. I don't have to look it up to know what it is. Interesting choice of word. Would I have picked the same one? It's less loaded than "survivor" or "stranger" but has a subliminal effect of assuming he's going to stay. After all, Mack didn't pick "visitor." Nor "guilty reminder," but that would just be stupid.

I'm sure lots of people will be keen to meet him. He's had a very difficult journey and I ask that people respect his need for the time and space to recover. We need time as a community to take in the news and resolve any issues we may have before he's introduced to everyone. Thank you for your understanding. I'm in the Dome now but ask you to discuss this in your groups and direct any questions to your councilor rather than my private stream. Thanks, Mack.

When I pull my attention from the message, I notice Nick staring at me. "So that's who it is," he says and looks at Mack's place.

“Aren’t you group leader this month?”

He nods and realizes he can’t just go and bang on the door. He has to go home and be available to anyone who wants to speak to him in person as well as online. He leaves and I set the health kit down at my feet before calling up the v-keyboard.

Thanks for the heads-up, Mack.

I don’t expect him to reply; he’s probably being inundated despite his request. But he does.

We couldn’t keep it a secret. I saw Nick poking his nose in and had to make a call on it. We knew we would have to tell everyone eventually. Come to the Dome. I want you here, you were with me when we found him.

He knows I hate meetings. No.

Ren, don’t be a pain in the arse.

People are going to realize he’s in your house. I’m going to stay with him in case he wakes up. I don’t want to get involved in the politics. That’s your bag.

I could do with some support.

You’ll be fine. Give me access to your house. I want to keep an eye on him. Look, Carmen is already coming over. You want her banging on the door to wake him up when we’re not there?

There’s a pause. I can see her talking to Nick, having intercepted him on the way home. It’s going to be everywhere in less than—

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