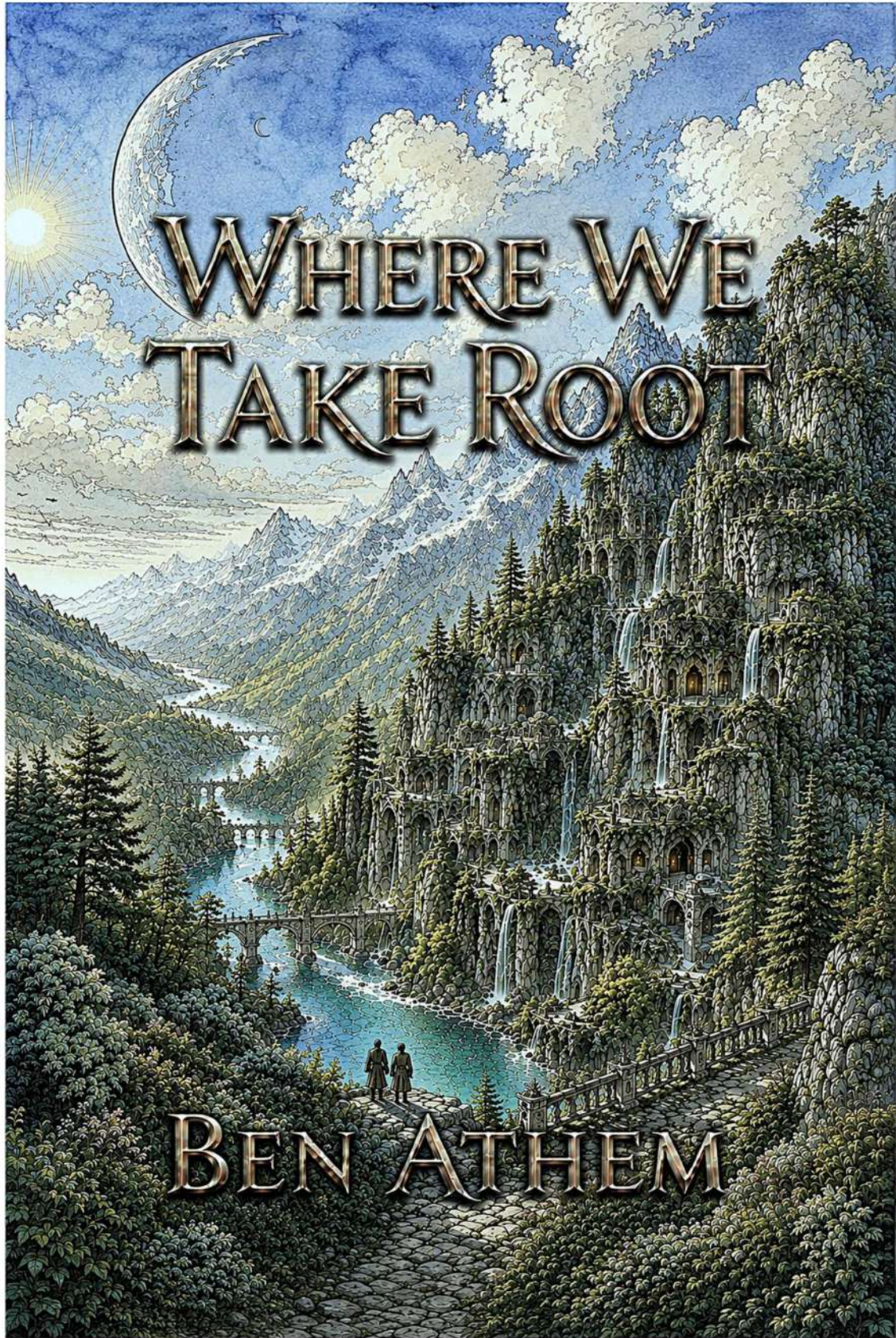




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Ben Athem

Where We Take Root

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First edition

To my other half

Life only feels like home with you.

“The best portion of a good man's life: his little, nameless,
unremembered acts of kindness and of love.”

— William Wordsworth

Preface

Every living thing **belongs**.

Not because it is placed there, but because it weaves into the life around it.

A seed does not ask whether the forest will accept it.

A river does not seek permission to meet the sea.

Each changes the other, and both are made greater for it.

Perhaps all living beings are this way.

Perhaps home is neither the place where our story begins nor where it ends,
but where our lives become woven into those of others in understanding.

This is a story of two lives shaped beneath different skies.

Of learning that even the greatest distance can be crossed by the choice to
listen.

For every living thing has a place.

Sometimes...

It is simply waiting to be **found**.

Prologue

Walking to the lab always brought Hale a quiet kind of joy. Nothing loud or all-consuming—just the small, steady sort that carried him through the first few tasks of the morning shift. Not that it was ever really morning out here.

The greenhouse greeted Hale with its familiar warmth. Humid air, heavy with the scent of crushed leaves, tomato vines, and clean, mineral-rich water, washed over him as the hatch sealed shut behind him. Beneath it lingered the faint smell of warm plastic and humming electronics—a reminder that every living thing here survived but by the grace of machines.

Rows of emerald stretched beneath the cool glow of grow lights, their leaves trembling gently in the steady breath of the ventilation system. Pumps murmured beneath the walkways, carrying nutrients through a maze of translucent tubing, all color-coded of course. Beyond the glass, space was silent and unforgiving. In here, life flourished.

Most of the plants Hale cared for had been altered in one way or another, but his favourites were the accelerated varieties. G.A.F.s grew quickly enough that, if you watched patiently, you could almost see them changing. Preparing worlds for future colonies meant nurturing life long before anyone knew where it would one day take root. The station drifted in stable orbit for that very purpose, its small crew ensuring the next home would be ready before its people arrived.

Working among growing things still felt like a privilege. Delta was meant to be an isolated posting—two years spent preparing a world nobody else would call home for another hundred cycles. Most people counted the days. Hale counted seedlings.

The quiet suited him. The greenhouse had become something quieter than duty. It had become home. Home itself was a long way behind now and, even before Hale had left Earth, many of the plants he remembered had already disappeared.

Adjusting the flow valve on a hydroponic tray, he watched nutrient solution pulse gently through the roots of a New Pine. Only three weeks ago the seedlings had barely emerged beneath the harsh glow of the grow lamps.

Everything suggested the colony ship Daedalus would arrive exactly on schedule. Automated reports from Command continued to insist nothing had changed, yet that certainty unsettled Hale more with every passing cycle. Life had a habit of going wrong without warning. Out here, he was determined to notice the warning first.

Hale skimmed the morning report. Power reserves were holding steady, life support remained within tolerance, and the hydroponics network hadn't wavered from standard parameters. Just another shift. The next report beeped through, this time from Command:

ICS DAEDALUS STATUS REPORT

Cycle: 2496.5

Time: 12:23 PST

External sensors: No anomalies detected

Internal monitors: No anomalies detected

Communications: 243 incoming 241 processed

Hale frowned. Two unprocessed messages. He was still considering them when Karu crashed into him, clinging to the tray of samples she was carrying in a gravity-defying swirl as she righted herself in a smooth motion that wouldn't have looked out of place during a martial arts recital or whatever they were called. She placed the samples on the desk as though nothing had happened before dropping into the chair beside him.

"I still have nothing from sector 12 about the newly adapted fertilizer I ordered, have you had anything from them? Its been three cycles already and I'm cutting things fine as they are." she croaked out, clearly having pulled another all-nighter.

"Nope, sorry. Only comms I've had today are the status reports. Maybe they'll get to you by the end of the cycle." Hoping this would lessen the stress somehow. "By the way, did you rea-" A loud, clear beep rang out, cutting off that thought and signaling an incoming commutation, without hesitating, Karu hit accept on the screen attached to the back of the desk.

"WHAT TIME DO YOU CALL THIS? I EXPECTED IT TO TAKE A LITTLE TIME BUT THIS IS-" something cut her off. I could faintly hear a frantic voice coming from Karu's earpiece. The next instant, red and blue lights began to flash and a deep, booming noise shook the entire lab, followed by a sickening groan of metal on metal and the most violent shaking Hale had ever experienced. Oh shit. Shit shit shit.

"Karu, what did they say, whats happening?" her face had paled far more than Hale had ever seen and he had certainly never seen her so speechless. "Karu? Whats going on?" Answered seconds later by a huge resounding blast and then an automated voice blaring over the intercom: 'INTEGRITY BREACHED, LOCKDOWN INCOMPLETE, BACK-UP SYSTEMS

INITIATED.’ Though Hale was sure the voice continued, he could no longer hear anything but the blood rushing in his ears. He racked his brain, desperately grasping at any and all procedures he could think of, anything that might help him make sense of the blaring alarms and warning-lights. Nothing. He was coming up blank. As the panic started to set in Hale felt his joints go rigid. Great. Not now. Please. His limbs began to tremble, gently at first, but growing in intensity and becoming harder to control. He was losing focus. Breath, just breath.. In one, two, three, four, out one, two three four. Nothing worked. What had his uncle said? Name something you can see. Okay. Flashing lights, Karu and my desk. Three things you can hear. Alarms. Someone screaming, possibly Hale. Alarms. This wasn’t working. The last step unstuck him. He couldn’t move a single limb. At least, not intentionally. He had to breathe, he couldn’t allow himself to spiral any further, but how could he not? Just as he thought he’d suffocate under the weight of the panic, Karu grabbed his face shouting something unintelligible.

“...no sense! They aren’t even.. phase 3... a hundred more cycles!” Try as he might, her words were lost on Hale in his current state. Visibly frustrated, Karu went back to frantically checking everything the system gave her access to. “...but even if they accelerated the testing, there’s no way...” She seemed more than just confused. She seemed distraught. Angry. Incredulous. What could be happening? Hale’s mind fractured into disconnected pieces. Procedure. Home. His uncle’s voice. None of them stayed long enough to become useful.

“How can it be here?!” Gripping the panel with one hand and rapidly typing away with the other, she seemed to have managed to find a way to monitor the ship’s main systems. Focusing his eyes took almost more effort

than he could manage, but what he saw pulled him right back to the reality of the moment.

“Does that say our orbit has destabilized?” Impossible. Once Delta was settled into her orbit, nothing short of something the size of a planet should have been able to do that, and Hale was sure the briefing stated there were no rogue bodies in this quadrant. Karu ignored his questioning, frenziedly pushing buttons and flipping switches Hale had completely lost the names for. He watched for a moment amazed at her drive, the determination to fix whatever problem she was faced with. He’d admired that about Karu since they met on their first day of training. Right now though, it was all he could do to stay upright. Just as he’d finished that thought, all sense of direction fizzled away as what was chaos descended into pandemonium. The alarms still blaring, every light in the lab went off at once, anything not nailed down drifted and flew around of its own accord. He caught a glimpse of an explosion on the far side of the lab before he lost consciousness.



About the Author

Ben Athem is the author of *Take Me With You* (available August 24, 2026). He lives in London with his partner, where he divides his free time between a mountain of books and his modest garden. *Take Me With You* is his first published work.

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