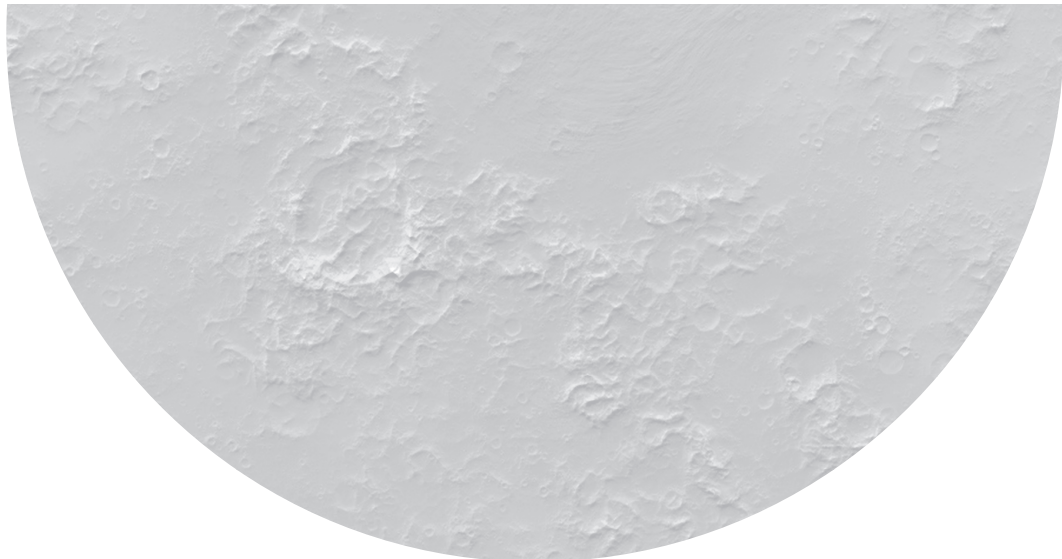
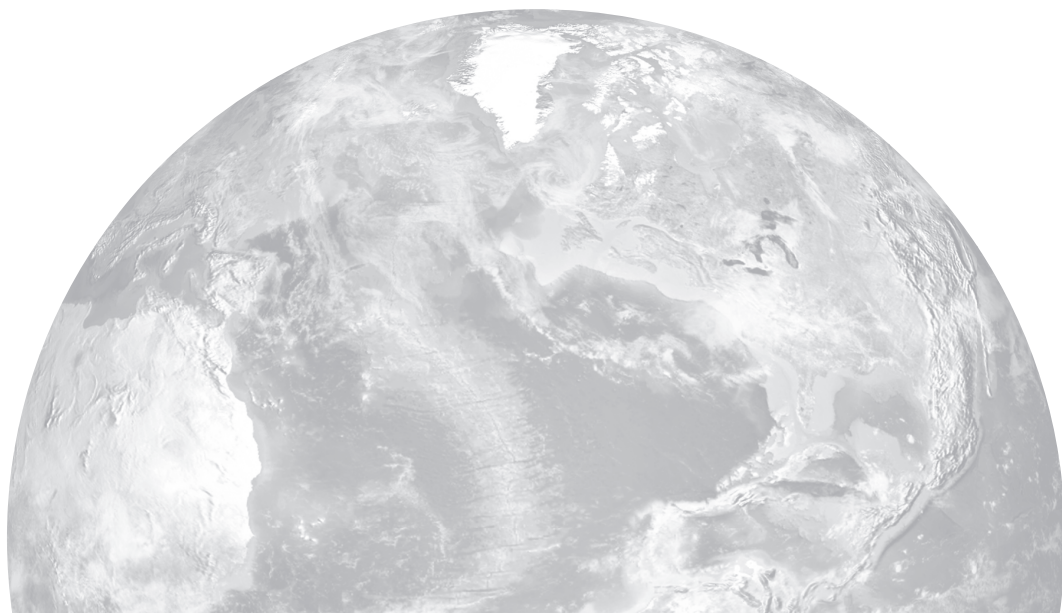


VAGABONDS



PART ONE

STAR DANCE



PROLOGUE

Once, a group of children was born on one world and grew up on another.

The world they were born into was a tower of rigid rules; the world they grew up on was a garden of rambling disorder. One was a magnificent, austere blueprint; the other was a wild bacchanalia. The two worlds shaped the children's lives one after the other, without seeking their consent, without consideration for their feelings, like two links in the chain of fate, sweeping them up in cold, irresistible tides.

What had been put together in the tower was smashed to bits in the garden; what had been forgotten in drunken revelry was still memorialized in the blueprint. Those who lived only in the tower never suffered the loss of faith; those who lived only for the pursuit of pleasure had no vision to strive for. Only those who had wandered through both worlds could experience that particular stormy night in which distant mirages faded away and countless strange flowers blossomed in the wasteland.

As a result of their experience, they suffered in silence and became the target of every criticism.

Who were these children and how did they come to live such lives are questions that could be fully answered only with the help of two hundred years of complicated history? Even the children

themselves couldn't offer a lucid explanation. They were perhaps among the youngest in the millennia-long history of the exiled. Before they even understood what fate was, they had been tossed into its vortex; while still ignorant of the existence of other worlds, another world had snatched them away. Their exile began at home, and they had no vote in history's direction.

Our story begins at the moment when the children were returning home. The body's journey was coming to an end, but the heart's exile was only about to begin.

This is the tale of the fall of the last utopia.

THE SHIP

The ship was about to dock. Time to turn out the lights.

The ship swayed in space like a drop of water gently flowing into the arc-shaped port. The ship was very old and glowed dimly like a badge that had been polished by time until the sharp angles and edges had worn away. Against the darkness of space, the ship seemed minuscule, and the vacuum accentuated its loneliness. The ship, the sun, and Mars formed a straight line, with the sun at the far end, Mars close at hand, and in the middle, the ship whose course was straight as a sword, its edge fading into obscurity.

Surrounded by darkness, the silvery drop of water approached the shore, very much alone.

This was *Maearth*, the only link between Earth and Mars.

The ship was unaware that, a hundred years before its birth, this port had been filled with transports shuttling back and forth like barges along a busy river. It was the second half of the twenty-first century, when humanity had finally broken through the triple barriers of gravity, the atmosphere, and psychology, and, full of anxiety and excitement, they sent cargo of every description to the distant red planet of their dreams. Competition extended from low Earth orbit all the way to the surface of Mars as men and women serving different governments in different uniforms speaking dif-

ferent languages completed different missions pursuant to different development plans. The transports back then had been clumsy, like metal elephants wrapped in thick gray-green steel skin, stepping across the gulf of space, slow and steady, thumping into the dusty surface of Mars, yawning open their cargo bay doors to disgorge heavy machinery, boxes of food, and eager minds full of passion.

The ship was also unaware that, seventy years before its birth, government transports were gradually replaced by private commercial development vessels. For thirty years Martian bases were all the rage, and the sensitive feelers of merchants, like magic beanstalks, rose inch by inch into the sky, and Jacks climbed up with bills of lading and lines of credit, ready to explore this wonderland of sand storms. Initially businesses focused on physical goods, and an alliance between big business and big government connected the two worlds with a web woven from land easements, sourcing licenses, and space product development rights, all gilded with stirring lines of poetry. Eventually attention shifted to knowledge itself, following the same path traced by the historical development of economies on Earth, except that a process that had taken two centuries in the past was compressed into twenty years. Intangible assets dominated business deals, and those who loved money plucked the brains of scientists like ripe fruits until virtual fences rose up between Martian bases. Back then the ships that plied the dark sea of space had carried spinning restaurants filled with cocktail parties and talk of contracts, an attempt to replicate the hubbub on Earth.

The ship was also unaware that, forty years before its birth, warships appeared along its current route. Once the war for Martian independence erupted—there were many causes—the adventurers and engineers of the various Martian bases united to resist their Earth-based overseers. With astronautics and prospecting technology, they sought to overcome money and political power. Warships linked together like Themistocles's wooden wall to repel

the invaders, a force as magnificent as the swelling tide, and which retreated just as quickly. Nimble, speedy warplanes then rushed in, propelled across the gulf of space by the rage of betrayal, at once wild and dispassionate, dropped their bombs so that bloody flowers bloomed silently in the dust.

The ship knew none of these things, because by the time it was born, a cease-fire had been in place for ten years. The night sky was once again silent, and the once-busy shipping route deserted. It was born in all-consuming darkness. Assembled from metallic fragments drifting in space, it faced the starry sea alone, shuttling back and forth between two planets, plying an ancient trade route that had witnessed both the glory of commerce and the devastation of war.

The ship sailed noiselessly across empty space, a single silvery drop traversing distance, traversing vacuum, traversing invisible ramparts, traversing a history deliberately forgotten.

Thirty years had passed since the ship's birth, and time's lasting tracks adorned its worn shell.

The inside of the ship was a maze. Except for the captain, no one understood its true layout.

It was a huge ship. Stairways connected multiple decks filled with twisting passages and honeycombed cabins. Large storage compartments scattered around the ship resembled palaces fallen into ruin, their spacious interiors piled with goods and equipment, their dusty corners confessing to an absence of visitors. Narrow passageways connected these palaces with bedrooms and dining halls, and the knotty structure resembled the plot of some particularly complicated novel.

Passengers walked on the inside of the cylindrical hull, held there by centripetal force as the hull spun. The thick central axis was the sky. The ship was full of outdated decorative elements: columns with relief carvings, tiled floors, old-fashioned mirrors

hanging on walls, ceilings covered by murals. This was how the ship paid respect to time, commemorated the fact that there had once been a time when humanity was not divided from itself.

On this particular journey the ship carried three separate groups of passengers: one was a fifty-member delegation from Earth, the second a fifty-member delegation from Mars, and the last twenty students from Mars who had been studying on Earth.

The two official delegations were putting on two world's fairs on two planets. After the successful conclusion of the Martian world's fair on Earth, the first ever Terran world's fair was about to open on Mars. The two delegations brought all kinds of interesting goods to show Earth the wonders of Mars, and vice versa, so that each side could be reminded of the presence of the other. After a long period of mutual isolation, this was how they would get to know each other again.

The students, all aged eighteen, were called the Mercury Group. Having spent the last five years living on Earth, they were now on their way home. Mercury was the messenger of the gods and also a planet outside the dyad of Earth and Mars; it represented the desire to communicate.

The war had concluded forty years earlier, and the ship had been the only link between Earth and Mars for thirty.

The ship had witnessed multiple rounds of negotiations, concluded deals, signed treaties, and table-pounding, chair-scraping, door-slamming conflicts. But other than these, it spent most of its time in idleness. The spacious holds were without cargo, the cabins passengers, the dining rooms food and music, and the pilots duties.

The pilots consisted of the captain and the co-captain, who was also the captain's wife. Both of them had wrinkled faces and silvery hair. They had worked on the ship for thirty years and

grown old in its maze. The ship was their home, their life, their world.

A pretty girl stood outside the captains' quarters.

"Have you never gone down to the surface, then?" she asked.

"We did go down a few times early on," the co-captain replied with a smile. Silvery curls piled atop her head, and two crescent-shaped creases radiated from the corners of her mouth. Her pose was graceful, like a tree in winter. "But then we got old and stopped."

"Why?"

"Frequent changes in gravity can be tough on old bones."

"Then why didn't you retire?"

"Garcia doesn't want to. He'd like to die on the ship."

"Are there many people on the ship?"

"When there's a mission, we have a crew of about twenty. Most of the time it's just the two of us."

"How often do you get missions?"

"It's a bit unpredictable. Sometimes the gap between flights is only four months, but it can be as long as more than a year."

"Don't you get lonely then?"

"Not at all. We're used to it."

The girl was quiet for a while. Her long lashes drooped and then lifted again.

"My grandfather mentions you often. He misses you."

"We think of him often as well. On Garcia's desk there's a photograph of the four of them, and he looks at it every day. When you get back, bring him our good wishes."

The girl smiled, warm but with a trace of sorrow.

"I'll come back and visit you again, Granny Ellie," she said. Her smile was warm because she liked the old woman. It was sad because she didn't think she would return, at least not for a long time.

"I look forward to it," the co-captain said, also smiling. She reached out and gently brushed the hair off the girl's shoulders. "You look as beautiful as your mother."

The captains' quarters were at the bow of the ship, right next to the cockpit and the weightless gym. The door to the set of cabins was located at the intersection of two hallways, and it was easy to walk past it without noticing. A blue spherical lamp hung above the door, illuminating the old woman and the youth as gently as the moon. The lamp was identical to the lamps found in front of homes on Mars, and each time a Martian passed by, the blue glow reminded them of home. The door itself was frosted glass, blending into the white walls on each side, and only the small decorative sculpture hanging on the door like a knocker showed that this panel was different from the others. The sculpture was a small, silvery spaceship, nose tilted up, with a string of silver bells hanging from the tail fins. Below was a line in flowery script: *Ellie, Garcia, and Maerth*.

The door usually stayed closed, and the two hallways, both empty, extended into the distance until the ends were lost to sight.

Garcia, the captain, was a lifelong friend of the girl's grandfather, Hans. In their youth the two had been pilots in the same squadron and had fought and flown side by side for more than a decade. After the war they both became pillars of the newborn Martian Republic. While Hans stayed on the planet, Garcia moved into the sky.

For a long period after the end of the war, the Martians had to endure unprecedented hardships. The poor soil, the thin air, the perpetual lack of water, the dangerous level of radiation—each one could have been fatal, and all were obstacles in the way of bare survival. Before the war, all development on Mars had been sustained by supplies from Earth, and most of the food had to be shipped in. Mars was like an unborn child, still tethered to the mother world by an umbilical cord. Independence was like the pain of labor, and the baby, with its cord cut, had to learn to breathe and eat on its own. There were things that could not be

obtained except from Earth, things that even brilliant minds could not create out of nothing, things like animals, beneficial microbes, macromolecules derived from petroleum. Without these, life could barely sustain itself, let alone thrive.

That was when Garcia decided to come aboard *Maeearth*.

It was the tenth year after the end of the war, and most Martians were still opposed to begging from Earth. But Garcia persisted. His was the first attempt at diplomacy by Mars, and he fought doggedly and alone at the border of Earth. More than anyone else, he had a clear understanding of prevailing attitudes on Earth: the shame of defeat turning into the pleasure of seeing the rebels suffer, of vengeance. But he refused to back down. To retreat was to accept that his newborn home would be forever stunted in its growth.

The second half of Garcia's life thus became entwined with the ship. He lived on the ship, sending message after message to Earth. He pleaded, insisted, threatened, enticed. He offered technologies invented on Mars for the necessities of life. For thirty years he did not return to the surface of his home planet. He was the entirety of the Martian diplomatic corps. He was responsible for the first deal between the two worlds, the first interchange delegations, the first world's fairs, the first interplanetary students. "Garcia" and "the Captain" became synonyms. His name and his position could no longer be distinguished, like flesh and blood.

Ellie, Garcia, and Maerth.

After saying their goodbyes, the girl turned away and was about to head off, when Ellie called to her.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Garcia would like you to bring a message to your grandfather."

The girl waited.

"Sometimes the fight over the treasure is more important than the treasure itself."

The girl pondered the cryptic message. Her lips parted, as though she wanted to ask a question, but she stopped herself. She knew that

the captain's message had to do with diplomacy, but she wasn't likely to understand the meaning behind such sensitive political matters. She nodded, assured Ellie that she would pass the message on, and left. She kept her legs straight, the tips of her toes pointing slightly outward, and glided away, as light and graceful as a striding crane, a dragonfly dipping over a pond, or a dustless breeze.

Ellie watched until the girl had disappeared before entering her quarters and shutting the door, the tinkling of the bells on the door lingering in the empty corridors.

She looked around the dark cabin and sighed. Garcia was already asleep. He was growing more frail with each passing day, and he had been so exhausted from the earlier conversation that he had to climb into bed right after. She didn't know how many more days he would last at his post, nor, for that matter, how many more days she herself would last. She knew only that at the long-ago moment when the two of them had set foot on this ship, she had already foreseen this day. The two of them had always been prepared to grow old here and die here. As long as they breathed, they would ply the space between Earth and Mars.

The girl who had just left was called Luoying. She was a member of the Mercury Group, and her specialty was dance.

"Maeearth" was cobbled together from the names of the ship's two ports and indicative of its mission. The name showed the yearning to communicate and the spirit of compromise, but it was also a classic instance of pragmatism in action, lacking euphony.

The ship's technology wasn't sophisticated. Both the structure and the engines were based on traditional designs dating back to the prewar era. Solar panels generated electricity, and the spinning hull simulated gravity. The design was strong, time-tested, but it was also clumsy and slow. Both Earth and Mars had experienced leaps in technology driven by the needs of war and could now produce far more advanced ships capable of completing the interplan-

etary trip in much less time. Still, after thirty years, no other ship had taken *Maeearth's* place. Its clumsiness and bulk also meant that it presented no threat, a perfect platform on which to compromise and achieve balance. Its ungainly appearance was better than sleek outlines; its lethargic pace better than nimbleness; its ineptitude better than capability. In a cold vacuum still suffused with suspicion and fear, it was like a giant whale that slowly carved out its own trail. Better than anyone, it understood that, for old foes, the hardest hurdle to cross wasn't physical distance. The most antiquated choice was also sometimes the most suitable.

The interior of the cylindrical hull was radially divided into four sections. The four quarters were interconnected, but the passageways were so complicated and far apart that few ever bothered to visit the other quarters. The crew took up one of the quarters, and the Terran delegation, the Martian delegation, and the Mercury Group each took up another. Although the four groups had been traveling together for almost a hundred days, there were few cross-group visits. Plenty of all-hands parties were held, to be sure, but the conversation was always strained and formal.

A different mood prevailed among each of the three delegations. The Martian delegates had completed their mission and were relaxed and joyful as they approached home. They no longer bothered with formal dress, and their conversation with one another was dominated by children, good food, their strange and silly experiences on Earth, the anxieties of middle age, and similar topics. In the dining hall of their quarter, they held daily gatherings, where homestyle cooking was salted with wit and laughter.

The Mercury Group, on the other hand, seemed to be holding a months-long post-graduation party. The twenty students had been away from Mars since they were thirteen years of age, and for the last five years, they had grown closer than blood siblings. During their time on Earth, they were scattered to every corner of the globe, and so this trip represented for them a rare reunion. They enjoyed and celebrated their youth: drinking, joking, flirting,

singing, playing ball in the spherical weightless gym at the bow of the ship.

The Terran delegation presented yet another sight. The delegates were from different countries, and they didn't know each other well. Other than business dinners, they spoke to each other only cautiously in bars. In a sense, the delegates were too similar to each other—prominent politicians, famous scientists, tycoons of industry, and big media stars—used to being the center of attention, and thus unable to be close to anyone. They dressed simply, with tasteful accents of luxury. They spoke warmly and casually but rarely disclosed anything personal. They tried to look humble but made sure that the effort was noticed.

In a small bar in the Terran quarter, delegates often gathered in small clusters of two or three, whispering among themselves. The bar was decorated after the fashion of Earth: dim lamps, stools around small tables, ice clinking in tumblers as the light refracted from the amber whiskey.

“What do you think of the tension between Antonov and Wang?”

“Really? I haven't noticed.”

“Observe. You need to observe.”

The speakers were a middle-aged, balding man and a young man with brown hair. The middle-aged man, a charming grin on his face, had asked the first question. His chin glowed blue from a close shave, and his gray eyes twinkled like the sea in summer. The younger man didn't say much, often answering a query with nothing more than a smile. Brown curls spilled over his brow, and his dark eyes were deeply set, so that in the dim light of the bar it was difficult to tell his expression. The middle-aged man was Thomas Theon, CEO of the Thales Media Group and heir to the vast Thales fortune. The younger man was Eko Lu, a filmmaker and one of the Thales Group's featured artists, there to document the delegation's visit to Mars.

Antonov and Wang were the delegates from Russia and China,

respectively. Due to the long-lasting border dispute between their two countries, they gave each other the cold shoulder. The Terran delegates came from countries with complicated mutual animosities, and though everyone tried to remain polite in public, there was much jostling and score keeping beneath the surface.

Theon, on the other hand, was a man without a nation. He held passports from four countries, maintained residences in five, appreciated the cuisines of six, and dealt with jet lag in seven. When nationalistic passions flared, he preferred to observe from the sidelines, popcorn in hand. His attitude was typical of the elites of the second half of the twenty-second century: nation-states were not things to be taken seriously, and the historical problems left unresolved by the era of globalization should be mocked rather than understood.

Eko understood what Theon was getting at, but he preferred not to engage. The delegation was full of people with conflicting desires and goals, and this was as it should be. Everyone came to Mars with something they wanted, including Eko.

“May I suggest a subject for your documentary?” asked Theon, still wearing that charming smile.

“Please.”

“A girl.”

“A girl?”

“A girl from the Mercury Group. Her name is Luoying.”

“Luoying . . . Which one is she again?”

“She has black hair—the one with the longest hair. Fair-skinned. A dancer.”

“I think I know who you’re talking about. Why her?”

“She’s going to give a solo recital once she gets back to Mars. It ought to be good. The market will eat up the footage.”

“Tell me more.”

“More . . . ? What do you mean?”

“Your real reason for asking me to film her.”

“You are much too paranoid,” said Theon with a laugh. “All right, I can tell you that her grandfather is Hans Sloan, the current

consul of Mars. She's the only granddaughter of the great dictator. I just found out myself."

"Does that mean I need to obtain the consul's permission first?"

"No. Don't let anyone know about your plans. Less trouble that way."

"Aren't you worried this will cause us trouble back home?"

"Let's worry about that when we get back."

Eko said nothing. He made no sign that he was accepting the suggestion, and he made no sign that he was rejecting it. Theon also didn't ask him to clarify. Mutual silence where there was no apparent consensus of any sort was the best. Eko wasn't bound by any promise, and Theon couldn't be blamed for inciting anything. Gently, Eko shook the ice in his glass. Kindly, Theon continued to watch him.

A veteran of more film releases than he cared to count, Theon knew very well how to target different audiences with exactly the right pitch. He was skilled at courting controversy for profit while evading responsibility. Eko was still too young to be free of the idealistic air of the academy. He was a thoughtful young man who disliked following trends. But Theon trusted in the power of time. He had seen far too many young artists, each believing themselves too creative to follow mere formula; he had also seen far too many artists experience the epiphany that only products that sold had any value. The market was merciless with youthful pride.

The bar played Nu Jazz, and the lilting melody provided good cover for the private discussions and whispered secrets at the separate tables. The room was warm; ties were loosened and collars unbuttoned. There was no bartender, and everyone mixed their own drinks from the glass case along the wall. Glass domes hung down from the ceiling over each table, illuminating the apparently friendly faces that masked the churning thoughts behind them. Once in a while peals of laughter burst from a table. The patrons were wrapping up their final conversations before docking.

Although the delegates from Earth each had their own goal, the overall thrust of their desire was for technology. Technology equaled wealth. For the whole of the twenty-second century, technology and know-how formed the foundation for every component of society all over the globe and became the new currency of the financial system. International economy relied on technology the same way old national economies had once depended on the gold standard. Control of technical know-how became the only way to maintain a difficult balance in an increasingly complex and fragile world.

Commerce in knowledge thus played a most pivotal role. It was thirst for technology that broke through the barriers created by memories of the war and built this new Silk Road that reached Mars. Terrans realized that Mars was like a farm whose most important crop was skilled engineers. Knowledge had allowed Mars to become independent, and it also meant that there was profit to be found on the red planet.

The music continued to play; the lights continued to glow; the smiling faces continued to nod and turn; the calculations behind them grew ever more intricate.

In the dim light of the bar, no one paid attention to the photographs hanging on the walls. These new patrons didn't understand that the photographs disguised traces of the past. Behind one of the photos was a bullet hole from twenty years earlier, and behind another was concealed a crack left when something slammed against the wall ten years ago. Once, an old man had roared here like a golden-maned lion, and another old man with silvery hair and beard had uncovered a deceitful scheme. Their names were Galiman and Ronen, and they were the other two men in the photograph on the captain's desk.

All conflicts had subsided, and all the unpleasantness of the past had been recorded in the official histories as misunderstandings. The scars of the past were covered up. The bar remained a comfortable, pleasant drinking hole, and the photographs rested in their dark brown frames, neatly in a grid.

Maeearth was going to dock in another few hours. The parties would soon end, and passionate laughter would soon subside into silence. The dance floor would be disassembled, and the fancy napkins and centerpieces would be put away. Pillows and sleeping bags were about to be collected. Screens were about to dim. The floor would be swept. The palatial storerooms would be emptied.

The only thing left behind would be the smooth floors and glass furniture, the naked body of the ship itself.

The ship had many experiences of being filled and being stripped. Every table had been covered by tablecloths from successive eras, and every rug had borne witness to changing conflicts of the passing years. The ship was used to going from full to empty, from colorless canvas to rainbow painting back to colorless canvas again.

Photographs filled the ship's winding passageways: everything from the earliest black-and-white images dating back to a time when humanity had not yet dreamed of going to the stars to the holographic displays showing the pride and joy of two peoples going their separate ways after the war. As one walked along one of these curving corridors, one hand caressing the wall, or climbed up and down the stairs, it was possible to travel through time, to view a montage of sliced-up history. There was no end or beginning to this journey, for the photographs were not arranged chronologically. Postwar photos might directly precede prewar ones, and 2096 might come right after 1905. To ignore sequencing in time was also a way to ignore disagreements. On these walls at least, Mars and Earth coexisted side by side in peace, and by taking a different course through the passageways one could reconstruct a different cycle of history.

Each time when the ship docked, decorations throughout the vessel were packed up and put away—except these photographs. No one knew that, during the days when the ship lay idle, the captain walked through every corridor, gently wiping off the dust from each frame.

The party reached its climax just before docking.

Luoying had never figured out the mazelike layout of the ship, but she thought of the weightless gym as a polestar of sorts. The weightless gym was the largest compartment on *Maeearth*, spherical in shape, and it did not spin along with the rest of the hull. Outside the gym was an annular observation platform, where she liked to go to relax. Wide viewports around the observation platform gave one the illusion of floating in space.

Coming from the captains' quarters, she rushed through the empty observation platform, surrounded by the stars. A loud cheer from inside the gym told her that the game was nearly at an end. Hurrying to the door, she pulled it open.

Waves of chaotic colors and sounds washed over her as though the spherical compartment were filled with exploding fireworks.

"Who's winning?" Luoying asked the person floating nearest to her.

Before she got an answer, someone had pulled her into an embrace. She looked up and saw that it was Leon.

"Our last match," mumbled Leon.

He let go of Luoying and opened his arms to Kingsley. They embraced and then slapped each other on the shoulders. Anka pushed his way through the crowd to face Luoying, but before he could say anything, Sorin had grabbed him by the shoulders from behind. Chania drifted by the group, and Luoying saw tears at the corners of her eyes.

Mira opened a couple of bottles of Martian Gio, and together the students poured the wine into the center of the spherical hall. Innumerable golden droplets glistened in the air. Everyone kicked off the wall and drifted into the middle. As they twirled and tumbled through the air, they opened their mouths and caught the globules of alcohol.

"To victory!" called out Anka. Everyone cheered.

“To a safe landing,” Anka whispered right after. Only Luoying, who was close by, heard him.

She closed her eyes, tilted back her head, and let herself drift. Invisible hands lifted her into the embrace of the stars.

This was the last night that would belong only to them.

At six in the morning Mars time, *Maeearth* approached the still-asleep planet along with the rising sun. The ship aimed for the port in areostationary orbit. The port was a giant ring in space: the inside was the berth for *Maeearth*, and the outside was for the fifteen shuttles that would bring the passengers to the surface.

The docking procedure would take three hours, leaving the passengers plenty of time to snooze. As the ship gently glided into the center of the ring, those looking out the front viewports saw the gate to a magnificent temple, and the ship was like a dove gliding toward the altar, holy and completely at ease. Sunlight glistened off the port’s metallic curve, and the shuttles lining up with their left wings touching the ring and right wings pointing at the dusty soil of Mars resembled temple guards silently standing at attention.

Out of the ship’s one hundred and twenty passengers, thirty-five were awake. Sitting or standing, in their own cabins or in some obscure corner of the ship, they watched as the ship slowly settled into its perch. As the ship came to a complete stop, the observers returned to their own beds without anyone noticing. The ship was completely at peace.

Half an hour later, everyone woke up to soft music, rubbed the sleep out of their eyes, and greeted one another. The disembarkation process was orderly and quick, and the passengers politely said their goodbyes, boarded separate shuttles, and headed for the surface.

It was the year 2190 on Earth, the year 40 on Mars.