

THE ASTRAL IMPERATIVE

Vol. 1 The Dream

1.

It began in the year 2037, when destiny met with the *Starship Aelita*. The vessel was a marvel of technology, able to sustain nine astronauts for three and a half months on the first manned mission to Mars.

Earth, having recently emerged from a decade of vicious regional conflict and wanton terrorist activity, faced a widespread shortage of energy and an ominous surge in global warming. Super storms and rising tides ravaged the continents with increasing frequency.

Nearing the brink of self-destruction, the planet sought confirmation, something to anoint the peace, sanctify the massive communal effort, and lend faith to the future. But some people were not so well intentioned, and other people were not prepared to meet their destiny.

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The red planet turned slowly in his mind. It was on fire, burning in the space between thoughts. His flight suit was well ventilated; the cockpit was air-conditioned to twenty-one degrees centigrade. It was the pressure to succeed that was cooking his brains. He was Captain Adam Sietzer, Officer In Command.

He was sitting on the edge of the launch pad, at the helm of an E-4 scramjet, weighing his blessings against his fears: thrilled to be first among men, terrified by the prospect of failure. But

the captain was not inclined to betray a fault. He lived inside. No one knew what he really thought and felt—not even his wife—yet everyone thought that Adam was the best suited for command. The sum total of all Earth’s hopes and dreams, the point man for human evolution, Captain Adam Sietzer was a stranger to the world that he represented.

Ground Control had halted countdown less than one minute to lift-off and rendered him speechless. They thought his silence was due to a technological glitch. They had been in constant conversation with Adam for the better part of three hours, since 03:00 hours EST, when he and his crewmates had boarded the ship at the Kennedy Space Center.

“Is there a problem in there?” Rounder inquired.

He was Flight Coordinator Jacob “Rounder” Valdez, speaking from his post at Ground Control. Rounder had a couple of preparatory moon shots under his ever-widening belt and had been a prime candidate to command the Mars expedition. But Adam got the call and Jacob got fat. Rounder had gained thirty-seven pounds during the past two years, a change of life that begot the nickname.

“No problem,” Adam hissed between clenched teeth, his body harnessed to the hot seat, his hands gripping the steely arms, droplets of sweat streaming across the contours of his awfully twisted face. “No problem at all.”

“It doesn’t sound like that to me,” Rounder challenged.

Rounder opened another channel and pressed the issue with Colonel Vladimir Sussenko, second in command. The burly Russian was seated beside Captain Sietzer in the cockpit.

“What the hell is going on in there?” Rounder demanded.

Vladimir said, “Nothing.”

“Too much nothing,” Rounder snapped. He hadn’t slept in two days. No doubt the mounting tension was getting to him, too. “Let me talk to Adam again.”

“This is Captain Adam Sietzer,” Adam declared, fighting to maintain his composure.

The firmness and formality of the declaration took Rounder by surprise. After all, these two men had known each other for a long time and rarely employed rank in conversation. They had met ten years ago, during the Second Korean War. Both Navy fighter pilots, Adam had been his wingman, and his best friend. In view of their history, Rounder was inclined to give Adam the benefit of the doubt and continued informally.

“I have to tell you that we are seeing a problem with the docking mechanism on *Star One* space station. And it appears that we may be contending with a tropical depression if we can’t get this puppy off the ground by 12:00 hours.”

The bad news did not sit well with Adam. He could hardly imagine spending the next six hours on the launch pad, confined to the cockpit and the ever-constricting trappings of his mind.

He released the harness, drew a deep, unsteady breath and sighed, “Yeah, well, you can’t fight destiny.”

Rounder could hardly argue the point. By default, upon losing command of the mission to Adam following his wife’s untimely death, Rounder had become the official government spokesman for the mission to Mars. While he answered to the world in the pressroom, Adam struggled to make peace with himself in the cockpit.

Under normal circumstances, Adam would simply compartmentalize his stress and find something of interest to pass the time. He liked to read hard science and historical biographies. He also liked toying around with mathematical puzzles. Most of all, Adam liked old gangster movies. Although those materials were readily available on board the scramjet, Adam was unable to focus. In despair, he asked Vladimir to play a game of chess, but Vladimir declined.

“Better I spend some of the time with the crew,” he said, before leaving Adam to his own ever-darkening impulses.

And the pressure continued to mount. Alone at the helm, Adam shut his eyes in an attempt to stifle the anxiety, and his mind filled with telling memories of his childhood. He recalled a day in the second grade when he was playing with a magnetized set of LEGOS, trying to force a small positive magnetic rod into a positive magnetic hole. Observing Adam’s increasing frustration, the teacher came to his aid.

“Are we doing okay today?” the teacher began.

“Okay,” Adam replied, without looking up at the teacher, his attention riveted to the problem at hand. He continued trying to jam the magnets together to no avail.

“Are you sure I can’t help you?”

“If you can change the laws of physics, you can help a lot,” Adam said. “That’s what I want to do. I want to change things. I want to make new laws.”

Adam's answer flabbergasted the teacher. She could not imagine how a second grader could know anything about the laws of physics. She didn't know that Adam was a highly imaginative child with a 171 IQ.

His parents were at once proud and fearful of his intelligence. They wanted a normal kid and were uncertain of the future: how to school him, how to relate to him, how much they should encourage him. Adam didn't want any special treatment or classes or teachers. He just wanted to be left alone to pursue his own interests on the Supergrid, which was a thousand times more powerful than its Internet predecessor. Adam had a fascination with space exploration.

To a large extent, Adam's wishes were granted. But his parents became increasingly distant and deferential. In reaction, Adam became increasingly withdrawn. By the time Adam reached middle school, he was practically raising himself. He studied alone and he played alone—primarily at the computer. His parents were concerned but ineffective, so afraid of making a mistake and stifling their son that they inadvertently neglected him, and Adam's emotional development was stunted.

Strangely enough, Adam didn't experience the pain of this childhood neglect until he was forty-six years old, sitting in the cockpit of the E-4 scramjet about to blast off into history. He had never felt so alone and disconnected, as if someone else was thinking his thoughts and living his life. For the first time in a very long time, Adam wished that he could turn to his wife for comfort and understanding. But Sara was out of reach, out on the tarmac sitting in the grandstand, rubbing elbows and ideas with the First Lady.

* * *

Sara knew that there could be a problem with Adam. She had become so concerned for her husband's welfare during the past year of training that she often wished that Rounder had gotten the call to command the mission to Mars. Then again, she would not be sitting in the VIP box, next to the president and the First Lady in the late-morning Florida heat, entertaining an invitation to dinner at the White House.

"It's hard to imagine the responsibility on your husband's shoulders," the First Lady said.

Sara smiled and nodded, wondering what held Adam together this long, marveling at his ability to hide from himself and everyone else on the planet. The man was hardly capable of

displaying emotion, his quick smile and affable personality belying the loneliness that ruled his life. He said that he loved Sara, but there was always something lacking in his touch, despite his great passion in bed. Or maybe it was in the eyes: they were cool, blue and distant. He was a good father—when he was present.

In time, Sara began to realize that she had fallen in love with her own projection. She hardly knew the man, and he became increasingly detached following Adam's selection to the Mars team. In fact, Adam was a tortured soul driven to perfection, so afraid of life that the prospect of a failed marriage was tantamount to death. Sara had threatened to leave him, but remained in deference to his higher calling and the needs of their children. She became less of a wife and more of a mother, and she learned how to hide her feelings.

Though concerned for Adam's welfare, she managed to wear a smile and maintain a seamless banter with the First Lady. When it became clear that lift-off would be delayed for several more hours, the president retired to an inner office at Ground Control to attend to the affairs of the country.

The women returned to an over-crowded VIP lounge where Sara began to drift. Suddenly overwhelmed by a roomful of strange and powerful people, Sara deflected more and more questions and eventually receded to the back of the room—where the First Lady found her, nursing a glass of orange juice.

“Not as easy as it looks,” the First Lady said, before leading Sara into an adjacent sitting room, where they could be alone.

Sara said, “I can't thank you enough.”

“It takes one to know one,” the First Lady sighed.

“One what?”

“One lonely woman, and now we are two,” The First Lady replied, reaching for Sara's hand.

They were sitting on a plush blue sofa. Sara was about to reply when she finally noticed the thick layer of pancake make-up on the First Lady's face, barely covering her scar-pocked skin.

“It's a nervous condition,” The First Lady explained, aware of Sara's interest. “The doctors tell me that it's a result of the constant pressures of public life.”

Sara was terribly embarrassed and began to fumble an apology when the First Lady continued, “It's just the cost of doing business, of being successful and holding on for dear life—as you will see. Your husband is sitting at the helm of our dreams, and the eyes of the entire

world are on him—and you. And neither one of you can afford to make a mistake. God only knows what you're really feeling, but I can make a pretty good guess. And you can't really share it with anyone, including me, because if you betray a weakness, you're afraid that you will somehow betray your husband, if not the expectations of the entire world."

Sara nodded. "I guess I've been so wrapped up in myself lately that I didn't consider anyone else's problems. I just couldn't imagine anyone else like me."

"I am more like you than you can imagine, my dear—living in the shadow of so much power for so many years, I feel more like a ghost than a person, as if I'm on the verge of disappearing half the time, the rest of the time internalizing all the tension and making myself old and sick before my time."

Sara said, "I don't really feel bad, but I suppose that I might be getting lost in all the exposure, never saying what I really think and feel, at times becoming unsure of what I'm really thinking and feeling, not knowing who I am while I'm in the process of trying to fathom Adam's life, what it must be like for him."

"Like nothing the world has ever known," the First Lady declared. "Like nothing you could possibly prepare for. In a great many ways, the journey that you are about to take within yourself may be as wild and wonderful and fearful as the voyage your husband is taking to the stars—like it was for me when I became First Lady. But it is a journey that you will take alone."

2.

Rounder opened the press briefing with a simple statement citing two problems with the launch: a glitch in the docking mechanism on *Star One*, and a violent storm system moving in from the Gulf.

“The idea is to fix the glitch before we contend with the storm. The launch is a race against time, nothing more,” Rounder explained.

He took several technical questions before a reporter, representing conservative interests, confronted him with a philosophical challenge.

“If I’m not mistaken, you have often equated the mission to Mars as a race for survival, as a necessity to fulfill our evolutionary destiny. Can you elaborate?”

“In the past we find the seeds of our future. From the very beginning of creation, it has been the primordial urge of life to survive, to expand the search for energies into unknown territories, to seek out others and unite with them in the quest for sustenance, to become self aware in the process of discovery and feed on the wonders of the imagination. This is the fuel that will take us to Mars.”

“In other words, you are equating the instinct to survive with the drive to explore?” the reporter pressed.

“Of course. The urge to survive implies the necessity of discovery. The search for food is an act of discovery. And the quest for knowledge is the evolutionary extension of the quest for sustenance. We must go to Mars and beyond if we are to survive.”

“Even at the expense of feeding ourselves?” a second reporter challenged. “Even if it means that some people might starve while others are well fed in the process of acquiring this knowledge?”

The question of priorities was nothing new. While the majority of the people on Earth did support the mission to Mars, a sizable opposition—comprised of an odd lot of wealthy globalists, environmental activists, far left liberals and religious conservatives—was against the mission. And Rounder never failed to meet their challenge.

“As far as I can see, we have come to a point in evolution that the act of feeding ourselves does not guarantee our survival—when our penchant to survive may be directly dependent on fulfilling the dream of our own becoming, on the acquisition of knowledge.”

The press fell silent for a moment, reflecting upon the past decade of war and the mounting ecological problems confronting Earth, before pressing ahead with their questions. Rounder was becoming exhausted, but he remained unfailingly patient and gracious to a fault. Now fifty-one years old and stocky, his black hair graying around the temples, Rounder had mellowed with the passage of time—his easy-going temperament belying the killer he had been.

Rounder loved battle, the smell of jet fuel, the power of life and death at his fingertips, the camaraderie of fellow soldiers engaging the enemy. He thrived on the adrenaline rush: the sharpening vision, the tightening muscles, the clarity of mind and purpose that defined the hunt when he equated facing death with the prospect of embracing the unknown, when he viewed war as an act of self-discovery.

The ethical questions came much later on the evolutionary spiral of his life: the hunt begetting too much death of friends and enemies, resulting in the emergence of conscience and the quest for the deeper meaning of a life less lived. By the war’s end, Rounder grew tired of all the killing and the massive effort it took to compose himself under pressure. He wanted more out of life than victory at someone else’s expense and went looking for the brighter side of self-discovery in the heavens as an astronaut. He began to practice Buddhist meditation during his training and gained a new appreciation for the preciousness of life.

His greatest dream was to command the first mission to Mars, but destiny took his wife and left him in the lurch. He lost confidence and focus, and command of the mission. And though he supported the decision to replace himself with Adam, Rounder suffered privately and deeply. While his mind was on the business at hand on the ground, his heart was with the crew on that ship bound for the stars.

The flight crew represented many countries, races and religions: two Russians and two Americans, one Japanese, one Chinese, one German, one Indian and one Kenyan. The flight plan was simple: scramjet up to the *Star One* space station, transfer to the *Starship Aelita*, and depart for Mars. Adam and crew had already taken the *Aelita* on a shakedown cruise several months ago. The ship performed beautifully. Adam was particularly impressed with the responsiveness of the MPD (Magnetoplasma Dynamic) drive.

The idea of taking a three-and-a-half-month flight to Mars in zero-g did not please him: too much downtime and too little privacy on the ship. The prospect of sharing himself was almost as dismaying as the pressure to succeed, and the anxiety continued to mount. Adam was in the midst of a deep breathing exercise, straining to maintain his composure, when Rounder reached him with more bad news.

“Word is that we’ll hold until dusk if we have to—or as long as you people can hold up.”

“We can hold as long as you can hold, my friend,” Adam said.

Once again, Rounder was bewildered by Adam’s odd choice of words. In all the time they had known each other, Rounder had never heard Adam employ the expression “my friend” with anyone.

“How about the rest of the crew, how are they holding up?” Rounder inquired, thinking that he might learn more about the captain’s state of mind by not pressing the issue directly.

“A little anxious maybe. I guess that we all got a little ahead of ourselves when the countdown passed one minute. You know how it is?”

“All too well,” Rounder said. He was pleased by Adam’s casual assessment of the situation—there was no greater rush than the anticipation of lift-off which, in many ways, was comparable to the rush of battle—but he was nonetheless concerned for Adam’s welfare.

“What about Eva, have you spoken to her?” he pressed.

“Not directly. Not since we boarded. Should I? Is she having a problem with any of this?”

“Hard to say, but a little talk wouldn’t hurt—if you have the mind for it.”

The ruse worked, getting Adam to talk to Eva, letting Adam think that he might be helping her.

Eva Stanton was the mission flight surgeon, a doctor of internal medicine who was also board certified in psychiatry. Thirty-nine years old and single, with short blond hair and high

cheekbones, Eva was beautiful by any standard. There was hardly a house on Earth that didn't have a likeness of Eva hanging from a wall in some kid's room. Adam and she were the perfect poster couple.

Adam was still fighting to get a grip on himself when Eva arrived in the cockpit. At Adam's request, she took Vladimir's seat. On cue, she began speaking in a light tone.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?"

"It's my pleasure to see you, Doctor. How can I help?"

Adam flashed a smile, but Eva was not deceived by his casual demeanor. The beads of sweat gathered on his forehead and the strain in his eyes told of an intense inner struggle.

"It must be something I ate," Eva said, rubbing her stomach. "I just feel a little queasy inside."

Adam nodded and sighed, "I guess we're all a little anxious."

"That must be it. But you know I usually look better to everyone else than I feel. Being a psychiatrist doesn't give me a pass at being all-too-human and a bit vulnerable."

"You mean you're lonely. You're going away for a long time and there's no one to say goodbye?"

Eva was momentarily stung by the sharpness of Adam's insight. The captain had never been so personal. "I guess so," Eva finally stumbled. She hadn't engaged in a meaningful romantic relationship in several years. "But I do have a crush on someone," she added mischievously.

"On this ship?"

"No, thank God. Things are hard enough already and we haven't even gone anywhere yet."

"So who's the lucky guy we're leaving behind?"

"Jacob. I think I've been falling in love with the symmetry of his mind. He's so eloquent, so passionate, and I've heard that he's a great Latin dancer. "But I haven't told him how I feel. It wouldn't be fair. Besides, I haven't had the opportunity."

Adam was both surprised and pleased by Eva's choice. He was about to reply when Ground Control required his full attention. "Duty calls," he said.

Eva said, "Thank you. I feel so much better after talking to you," She left the cockpit, thinking that she had left Adam in a better frame of mind.

Adam had been so well played by Eva that he didn't know what to think or who to thank for his regained composure.

* * *

While Adam engaged Ground Control, Vladimir Sussenko reflected on his irritation with his countryman, mission astrobiologist Yuri Popovitch. Vladimir wound up sitting beside Yuri at the back of the jet and was reminded of how much he despised him.

To begin with, Vladimir felt that he should have been in command of this first mission to Mars—would have been in command if Russia were as wealthy as America. He had logged far more time in space than Adam Sietzer, and he had been a renowned fighter pilot. Nevertheless, the United States had footed the lion's share of the bill for the Mars expedition, and had first dibs on command.

The Americans also insisted on Adam being the first man to set foot on Mars. But after two years of haggling the Russians did wrangle a concession. The bottom rung of the *Aelita* Mars shuttle was extended to accommodate two astronauts simultaneously, both of whom, the American and the Russian, would be the first men to set foot on Mars. As a result of this politically correct decision, Captain Adam Sietzer and Co-Captain Vladimir Sussenko had spent a lot of time together in training and in public.

The problem with Yuri began as a rumor during the last year of training for the mission; the Chinese government did not want Vladimir to take that first step onto Mars with Adam. They wanted Yuri to share the honor because too much of Vladimir's celebrity had come at the expense of the Chinese. It was Vladimir, the ace fighter pilot, who had downed three Chinese fighters in an unreported dogfight over the China Sea during the Second Korean War. While Yuri had no say in the matter, Vladimir came to resent him when he got wind of the rumor.

When Eva returned to her seat, Vladimir left for the helm without saying a word to Yuri.

"Anything is new?" Vladimir began, taking his seat beside Adam in the cockpit.

"Not really. How are the others taking it?"

Vladimir shrugged. "Okay, I think. But I am not so good after sitting with Yuri, so I would like to take my frustration out on you, my captain."

Adam nodded and Vladimir reached behind his seat for a magnetic chessboard. Both accomplished players, they were not inclined to use the computer. They liked to feel the pieces when they could and see the game in three dimensions.

Within ten moves, Vladimir gained a strategic advantage. He was the superior player, but he didn't always win because Adam had a photographic memory. When the game started, Adam merely accessed the chess compartment in his brain, opened the Vladimir "window," and compared Vladimir's present moves against old patterns. If there was a lack of creativity in Vladimir's play, Adam would invariably crush him.

It was through these occasional chess matches that Vladimir got to know Adam: how he thought, how he fought, how he used his memory to make up for a lack of creativity, how fast Adam buried an opponent when he recognized a weakness, how easily Adam was beaten when he couldn't recognize a strategy, how defensive Adam was by nature. This game was no different than any other until it neared the end.

Even playing whites, Adam ceded the offensive to Vladimir and waited until he recognized a weakness. He was two moves away from checkmate when he uncharacteristically offered Vladimir a stalemate.

"Since when do you learn compassion?" Vladimir said, clearing the board.

"Since we boarded this jet. Patience has been a good teacher, my friend."

"If you are saying so my captain, but mine is running out with Yuri."

"I understand, but a lot can happen between now and our arrival on Mars."

"I tell myself this each time I think about it, but I cannot stop the thinking that the honor will go to that piss-ass peasant, and I still cannot believe that my government will allow this to happen. Then I think about the Chinese who instigated this arrangement. If anything, I should be despising Mei Yi."

Mei Yi was the mission geologist with a flare for the dramatic and a weakness for the dogmatic. A forty-three-year-old world-class rock climber and a noted gourmet chef, Mei Yi was a woman with strong opinions that she managed to hide from the selection committee.

She liked the German and the Americans. She tolerated the Japanese, loathed the Indian and the African, and despised the two Russians. But she was well into her training before her prejudices began to surface and all attempts to remove her from the mission had failed. Either Mei Yi was going to Mars or the Chinese were going to withdraw their support for the mission and make trouble. After all, she was the heroine of China, and the country had far too much invested in her to make a substitution. In addition to her renowned climbing and cooking, Mei Yi

had won a gold medal in gymnastics in the 2012 Olympics. She was the Chinese Renaissance woman.

Adam said, “I think that you’ve been thinking too much and all these petty dislikes don’t become you. You are among the very best fighter pilots in the world. You are a hero to your people. You are second in command of the first expedition to Mars and you will find a way to fulfill your destiny. You waste your time measuring yourself against the foibles of other people and the designs of other governments. Have faith, my friend.”

* * *

“How are your children doing with all this?” The First Lady asked, now sipping a mimosa.

“Better than me, of course,” Sara sighed.

Her kids—ten year-old Isaac, and Jacob, who was eight—were tired of waiting and wound up playing an innovative war game in a Ground Control holo-suite. The game was designed by legendary computer whiz Richard “Mad” Maher and based upon *Ender’s Game*, a turn-of-the-millennium sci-fi literary classic. The kids sat in “war” chairs at the center of the room and engaged a virtual enemy in a galaxy far, far away, while their father clung to his command and their mother parried with her own destiny.

The First Lady continued to study Sara, before posing the next question. “Would you like to speak with your husband?”

Sara wanted to say yes, but she didn’t want to appear needy or concerned. She also felt that she was being tested. “Another time, maybe, when he’s up in the space station, before he leaves for Mars.”

The First Lady admired Sara’s courage and loyalty. . “Have you thought about a career in politics?”

Sara was momentarily flustered and said, “I can’t say that I have.”

“You might surprise yourself.”

Sara blushed, “I hardly think . . .”

The First Lady cut her off with a wave of the hand. “When your husband returns from Mars, what you think and feel may be the stuff that politics is made of.”

Sara looked up into the First Lady's tired eyes and blinked. It was at that very moment that she finally and fully realized the magnitude of her husband's calling. Adam Sietzer was going to change the course of human history forever—if he survived the journey, and if he didn't have a nervous breakdown along the way.