

Prologue

The Telelevator Departure Lounge. AD 2259

The wind whistled down from the dark Himalayas. It moaned around the departure lounge and rattled the windows.

“It’s swaying,” said one of the twelve faces pressed against the glass. They craned their necks upwards. A tower of glittering lights soared into the turbulent sky. It was the Telelevator.

“We’ll soon leave the bad weather behind,” one of the girls replied. “Once we hit the stratosphere, it’s as quiet as a Sunday morning. I’m not scared.”

“Well, you should be.”

Twelve heads swivelled. A small blond-haired boy was sitting under the departure screen, stroking the back of his left hand. His ice-blue eyes gazed back at them.

“What for?” asked a big, beefy boy.

“An elevator to Space? What could be more flimsy?” the boy said. “Eighty miles of nanocarbon, all weighing down on those unsupported foundations? One strong puff and the whole thing comes crashing down. You do know what the low pressure of the stratosphere does? A human body pops like a balloon.”

“You’re lying!” the beefy boy shouted. “He’s just trying to frighten us.”

The smaller boy cackled, rubbing his hand faster.

“What if I am? Going to make something of it?”

“Maybe I will, creep.” The bigger boy drew up his shoulders.

“Attention all passengers! The Telelevator is now boarding.”

The youngsters turned to see a rotund, uniformed woman at the boarding desk.

IAN C DOUGLAS

“My name is Stella Gates, Space Stewardess-in-Chief for tonight’s trip. Booked by the Ophir Chasma School for Psychic Endeavour especially for all newbies who missed the first flight. Three months ago! You lot are going to have a lot of catching up to do. Now, present your boarding chips for inspection.”

The teenagers clustered around the stewardess, everyone except the small blond boy who remained seated. He checked no one was looking.

“Shh, be still,” he whispered to his finger. The Spikeworm on his knuckle hissed. The boy crooked his finger and the creature’s razor-sharp spines unfolded.

“You’re beautiful, beautiful as death.”

It throbbed happily. The creature was part leech and part spiny sea urchin. Its lower body bonded to the boy’s finger. Bending his digit opened up the nest of venomous quills. Nobody could see the Spikeworm, because it existed purely in the boy’s imagination. And yet it had already poisoned three men.

“And your name is?” Stella asked.

The blond boy returned her stare without blinking. “Fitch. Fitch Crawly.”

“Did you say Crawly?” the beefy boy guffawed. “Talk about creepy crawly!”

Fitch straightened his finger and the Spikeworm folded up.

“Can we go onboard now?” he said turning his head away from the Stewardess. Her odour of garlic and strong coffee was nauseating.

She scanned his boarding chip with her magnopad.

“Yep. All onboard.”

The group eagerly lined up at the auto-doors. Fitch lingered at the back, waiting for his chance.

“Ow!” cried the beefy boy, grasping his backside. “Creepy Crawly pinched me.”

Stella Gates rolled her eyes.

"I never touched his stinky butt," Fitch smirked, pushing to the head of the queue.

Stella glared at the bigger boy. "I want no trouble on my shift. Is that clear?"

He nodded miserably.

"Just ninety minutes," Stella said aloud. "Ninety minutes by Televator to the threshold of space and the rendezvous with your go-ship to Mars. That better be ninety minutes of good behaviour, unless you want to be sent home. And there aren't any parachutes on the Televator."

Silence swamped the children.

The ghost of a smile crept across Stella's lips. "Good. Now fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy glide."