

From Electron's Blade, IFWG Publishing, publication June 1st 2019

Prologue

AD 2260

Onboard the Televator, Above the Himalayas

Most of the screamers stopped screaming after the first forty miles. By that time, the Televator was halfway up. Only another forty to Hyperbola Spaceport and from there to all known points in the galaxy. The passengers were comforted knowing they had less distance ahead than behind. After all, rotating up a magnetic pole into outer space could give anyone the heebie-jeebies.

Stella Gates, Stewardess-in-Chief, dimmed the cabin lights with a flick of her magnopad. The passengers settled down. Some read iMags, some enjoyed the in-flight holo-movie, and others simply snored into their pillows.

“I’ve had worse shifts,” she remarked.

With any luck the passengers would doze through the final hours. And Stella could enjoy some coffee and cheese in the galley.

Stella peered through the window. She never tired of the view from the Televator. The horizon curved sharply at this height. A summer dusk poured indigo across the heavens. Far below, the Himalayas looked like scratches in the ground.

A child yawned in a nearby seat. In another couple of days, that little girl would wake up on a new world. Stella thought of all colonists she’d ferried to the spaceport. Thousands over the years. Just like this batch, another hundred or so bound for—where was it this time?

“Oh yes, Denebola Five.” she murmured.

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None of them ever came back. Sometimes that struck Stella as curious. But she was too busy with her work to worry about strangers. Over time, the faces all faded away. She rarely remembered an individual passenger, only the unspeakably rude ones.

There was that famous archaeologist. What was his name? The one that vanished on Mars.

“Professor Tiberius Magma. Right bossy boots.”

And then there was that naughty boy. The time the Televator broke down. What was his name? Ugly looking kid with blue hair. Weird. Stella didn't like weirdoes.

Somebody screamed.

Stella rolled her eyes. Another anxiety attack?

A pale-faced woman was pointing at her window. Stella glanced out again. She screamed.

It was tiny. Very tiny. But hurtling nearer. A pencil-shaped object with a red tip. A flame blasted from the end. A vapour plume trailed away into snowy mountains.

Stella's mind raced. What did they call those things? She'd only seen them in the history iBooks. Outmoded technology from long ago, before magnodrives were invented. Torpedoes? Rockets? No, not quite. Oh, yes...missiles!

They were under attack. Terrorists! That crazy Martian State Brigade.

Images poured through Stella's mind at the speed of light. Mister Flopsy, her beloved tabby, waiting at home. Dear old Mummy, also waiting for her. The long-ago boyfriend who broke her heart.

Stella drew a deep breath. Panic was not an option. She had a job to do.

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Red lights started flashing. The captain was activating emergency protocols.

Stella switched her magnopad to loudspeaker.

“Attention! Sit down, fasten safety belts and assume crash position.”

People obeyed her command, even as they cried and whimpered and prayed.

Couples held hands. Parents hugged their children. Stella envied them.

She looked out again.

“Yes!” she cried, punching the air. The missile had peaked. It was beginning to drop, on a trajectory sure to miss the cabin. They were saved.

Her skin crawled. They were not saved. The missile was still on a collision course with the eighty-mile high tower, somewhere below.

Stella squealed and made a dash for her landing seat. She buckled herself in as fast as possible. The Televator was made of carbon nano-tubes, the strongest substance in the world. But was it strong enough to withstand a crash?

A faraway boom popped like a cork.

The cabin was tilting. Cups rolled away. Bags fell out of overhead lockers. There was only one explanation. The missile's impact was causing the tower to bend. But for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Newton's third law. Like a pendulum, the tower was swinging to the left. Would it swing back again?

“It's okay,” she shouted. “The Televator will right itself.”

Thank heavens! The cabin was moving back to the centre. It was righting itself. Stella saw hope flicker across the sea of faces.

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A noise of metal buckling and twisting echoed up the shaft. Stella pictured it, perhaps kilometres beneath, the tower snapping in two. For one ice-cold second nothing happened. And then they fell.