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Opening extract from

# Mars Evacuees

Written by

**Sophie McDougall**

Published by

**Egmont Books Ltd**

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First published in Great Britain 2014
by Egmont UK Limited
The Yellow Building, 1 Nicholas Road, London W11 4AN

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ISBN 978 1 4052 6867 7

www.egmont.co.uk

56270/1

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the CPI Group.

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EGMONT

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# 1

When the polar ice advanced as far as Nottingham, my school was closed and I was evacuated to Mars.

Miss Clatworthy called me into her office to tell me about it. I'd had in the back of my mind that she might be going to say the aliens had finally shot down my mother's spacefighter, so on the whole I took the actual news fairly well. And that's even though I knew Mars wasn't really ready for normal people to live on yet. They'd been terraforming it for years and years, but even after everything they'd squirted or sprayed or puffed at it, and all the money they'd spent on toasting it gently like a gigantic scone, you could still only *sort of* breathe the air and *sort of* not get sunburned to death. So you can see that the fact someone had decided I would be safer there than say, Surrey, was not a sign that the war with the aliens was going fantastically well.

Still, after eight months of Muckling Abbot School for Girls, I thought I could probably cope. It was one of those huge old posh schools that are practically castles, and must have been pretty draughty even before the Morrors came along in their invisible ships and said, 'Oh we're going to settle on your planet! We only need the poles, which

are more suitable for our needs! Don't worry; you will hardly know we're here! And as a sweetener we will reverse global warming!' (Because that was a bad thing back then, apparently.) And of course, it turned out 'the poles' meant rather more of Earth than we were entirely happy about, and that they could reverse global warming rather more thoroughly than we liked.

'Of course,' Miss Clatworthy said, 'it's an Emergency Earth Coalition project and an Emergency Earth Coalition school up there. So it's somewhat taken for granted you will enrol as a cadet in the Exo-Defence Force.'

Well that was a bit sooner than I expected, but I'd got the general idea of my future a long time ago, and whether I liked it or not it was always going to involve shooting things.

'Of course,' I agreed.

Now I knew what was really going on I thought I might as well relax, and I could even enjoy the fact the office was warmer than most of the school. We were on the coast and about fifty miles south of the worst of the ice, but that wasn't saying much, what with the snow scouring across the playing fields in July and icicles the size of your leg dangling off everything and there never being enough power to keep anywhere properly warm. But there have got to be some perks to being the headmistress, I suppose, and Miss Clatworthy had a tiny coal fire going. I inched towards it and hoped she'd keep talking for a while.

She did. 'And they'll have those new *robots* teaching you, I dare say! No more boring old fuddy-duddy *human*

teachers!' she said, all tight-lipped and fake-jolly even though she obviously didn't think it was a good thing.

I nodded. I *was* quite looking forward to seeing those. We only had a couple of robots for cleaning at Muckling Abbot and they were really old and didn't even talk.

Miss Clatworthy sighed. 'It's all such a different world from when I was your age! But I'm sure you'll be a credit to Muckling Abbot, and you'll be following in dear Captain Dare's footsteps. Your mother is *such* an inspiration to us all, Alice.'

'Of course,' I said again. There was actually a framed poster of my mother on the wall. This wasn't as odd as it sounds. That particular shot of Mum, tossing back her hair in front of the Union Jack on the fin of her spacefighter, was very popular. She'd just blown up a lot of Morror ships at the Battle of Kara and that picture ended up all over the newspapers and that was when she started to become famous. Miss Clatworthy's poster was one of those ones with 'FOR EARTH! FOR ENGLAND!' printed on them.

I didn't like looking at it very much.

'There's a letter for you – I think it must be from her,' said Miss Clatworthy rather wistfully, as if she wished a small nugget of Mum's war-hero glory would fall out of the envelope and make everything a little bit better.

'Thank you,' I said.

'You must be so proud of her.'

'Yes,' I said. And I was. But Miss Clatworthy looked at me in a vaguely discontented way. Teachers often thought

being Stephanie Dare's daughter meant I ought to march around the school setting a splendid example of morale and patriotism, and sometimes took me aside to tell me so. The other girls tended to think it meant I was in constant need of taking down a peg or two, and sometimes took me aside to tell me that.

This time Miss Clatworthy had other things on her mind, though. 'And when you're old enough,' she said, 'I'm sure you'll give those fiendish creatures what for! Those cowardly, invisible brutes! Teach them to come and freeze over our planet as if they own the place!'

That was when I noticed it wasn't just because of the cold that she was trembling and that her eyes were watery and pink. I felt sort of awful. She really must love the school, I thought. She was always telling us in assembly how we were supposed to, but it hadn't occurred to me anyone actually could.

Later I wished I'd thought of saying something plucky and full of School Spirit like, 'Oh, Miss Clatworthy, it'll take more than a few invisible aliens to shut down Muckling Abbot School for Girls forever! We'll soon be back – and more ladylike than ever!' But I'm not very good at that sort of thing, and at the time all I could think was that I wanted to say sorry. I mean not just, 'I'm sorry you're sad,' but sorry as if it was partly my fault. I don't know why, unless it was because of being twelve and not being able to remember what it was like *not* to have fiendish creatures freezing over our planet as if they owned the

place. Sometimes I did feel like that when adults got upset and homesick for how things were before. It made me feel as if the aliens and kids my age were all part of the same thing. We all happened at around the same time.

Obviously I was scared of the Morrors, because you can't see them and they can kill you, and obviously I really wished they would go away. But I don't think it ever bothered me so much that they *exist*, the way it bothers adults. When we did history I could imagine Romans, or Vikings, or Victorians – but I couldn't imagine fifteen years ago and everyone running around being almost normal, but with no Emergency Earth Coalition and no one even knowing what Morrors were and hardly anyone being in the army at all.

I couldn't say any of that, so I just said, 'Yes, I'll try to kill lots of aliens, Miss Clatworthy.' And that didn't seem to cheer her up much.

Now, you'll have noticed Miss Clatworthy wasn't making this announcement to the whole school. I certainly had. 'It's just me going, then,' I said. 'Just me from Muckling Abbot.'

'There are only a few hundred places open for now. Maybe they'll send more later,' said Miss Clatworthy. 'The rest of us will just head south to wherever will take us. There are the evacuee programmes on the South Coast . . . and the Channel Islands . . . and closer to the Equator for those who've got the connections and money, I suppose. So you are *a very lucky girl*, Alice,' she finished. 'And it might

be wise if you don't brag about this to the other girls.'

That annoyed me. 'I wasn't going to *brag*,' I said, feeling less sorry for her. Honestly, didn't she realise I had enough trouble with people like Juliet Maitland and Annabel Stoker lurking around the school whispering, 'Alice Dare thinks she's so *special* just because of her mum,' and Finty Carmichael reminding me all the time that before my mum's exploits became so *fashionable*, she was just a bank teller and my dad was a plumber and really I was a charity case.

That was one of the reasons I did not like Muckling Abbot. The others were these:

1) Even with a desperate battle for the survival of humanity going on, we were still all supposed to be highly ladylike and virtuous and proper, which meant: that you should not run in any circumstances except after a ball or away from an alien, that you should prefer to die rather than wear a hairband of an incorrect colour, and that you should act at all times as if you had completely failed to notice that certain aspects of our situation maybe kind of sucked.

2) Horrifying sludge-green uniforms in which we were all slowly dying of hypothermia while the teachers could wear as many jumpers and coats as they liked.

3) We were all divided up into houses with stupid names like Windsor and Plantagenet and expected to have House Spirit on top of School Spirit, and get really upset if our

house didn't win trophies for punctuality or tennis. Which I thought amounted to an incredibly obvious trick being played on us, as it does not benefit you personally at all if your Head of House is allowed temporary custody of a small silver cup with a picture of a Tudor Rose on it. But no one else seemed to agree.

4) Lots of *singing*.

Finty Carmichael was perfectly right that back in the good old days which none of us could remember, I wouldn't have ended up at a posh school like Muckling Abbot. But I had to go somewhere; Gran's health wasn't great so she couldn't look after me very well any more, and after the Battle of Kara there was this Emergency Earth Coalition programme about the education and care of the dependents of front-line fighters (especially the dependents of people who got made into posters, though obviously they didn't say that). So the government was already in the way of sending me places, even before this Mars thing.

'Good luck, then, Alice,' said Miss Clatworthy, at last.

'Good luck to you too, Miss Clatworthy,' I said, and wondered if I ought to salute, if I was going to be in the army now.

# 2

What I was supposed to do after seeing Miss Clatworthy was go to the main hall with everyone else to sing the school song a few hundred times and listen to encouraging speeches and broadcasts from the EEC President and so on. But I didn't feel like going and, in the circumstances, I thought there was a limit to how much trouble I could get into if I dodged it. So I went up on to the school battlements – yes, there were battlements – and read Mum's letter.

> *Darling, so exciting that you'll be exploring Mars! I wish I could go too! Maybe one day if the Morrors give us a break. I've just come back from my first run in one of the new spacefighters. They're called Flarehawks – had you heard about them? Wonderful machines, much faster than the old Auroras. Mine handles so beautifully I feel as if she knows what I want to do almost before I think it. As soon as I climbed into the cockpit I knew we were going to do some great flying together.*
>
> *So out we went, and I was glad because we've had a boring few weeks sub-atmo just blasting up invisibility generators on Morror bases near New*

*Zealand; I couldn't wait to get out into space again.*

*You never quite get used to seeing that net of light-shields round the planet, Alice, you'll see it on your way to Mars. And I can't tell you how much I hope one day you'll get to see the world without it. But we made some nice big holes in it – before the Morrors caught up with us.*

*You know I've got a sort of sense about these things – even before the sensors pick them up, I can tell when a pack of Morror ships are on to me. Sometimes I almost forget they're invisible. I was sweeping up the reflector discs 2000 miles somewhere over the Pacific, when I got that feeling and swung round as fast as I could and sure enough the sensors started going wild and when I launched a spray of torpedoes into the dark and it lit up the Morror ships for a split second, horseshoe-shaped and glowing in the sparks. And there were a lot of them.*

*So I charged straight into the midst of them where it would be hard to get a shot at me and we tussled and dodged and eventually I managed to soar up and pounce down on them, and I took out three before my wingman came in to help me out. Then I went diving back towards Earth with the last two behind me and I pulled out just before I hit the atmosphere. One of them went straight through, the other one hit at the wrong angle and I could*

*see its outline again for a second in the burning air before it was ripped apart. Then I dipped through into the atmosphere to find the last ship – and we fought it out one-to-one over Antarctica.*

*The best woman won, I hope! The poor Flarehawk took some knocks – sad when it looked so new and shiny when I went out – but the mechanics'll soon have patched it up and I'll get back to work. And right now a few more kilowatts of sunlight are keeping Earth warm and even if victory's still a long way off, I hope we got a little closer.*

*DON'T WORRY about me. I'm fine!*

*I miss you lots. All my love – Mum.*

I sighed a little bit. It's not that I wanted Mum to be unhappy, of course, but I couldn't help wishing she didn't *enjoy* the war quite so much. She had to be one of the only people in the world who did.

I don't want to give you the wrong idea about her. If, as she merrily swooped around the planet terrorising the invading aliens, some sort of genie with time-travelling powers had whooshed up in front of her and said, 'Look, Stephanie Dare. Say the word and the war will NEVER HAVE HAPPENED and everyone who got killed in it will still be alive and your daughter will actually get to live with you and everything will be FINE – but you will have to be a bank teller again and never get to charge around in a spaceship blowing things up, or be on a poster or anything'

– then of course she would have said, 'Go ahead.' Because she is a good person. But some people never find out what they want to do, or what they're good at. And even if my mum had somehow worked out, when sitting behind her counter at the bank, that what she really wanted to do and was really good at was being an alien-fighting, flying-ace space pilot, you can see how the knowledge would not have been all that useful to her.

I hoped Dad at least knew where I was going. He was an engineer on a submarine laying mines under the ice cap, so there wouldn't be a letter from him for a while. I hadn't seen him for even longer than I hadn't seen Mum, but apart from some interest in getting to see the various odd creatures that the Morrors had released into the oceans, he had never given the impression he was having a nice time.

The sea was thick with clots of ice, a few loose bergs drifting along in the distance. I could just hear the purr of wings from a flight of heatships hovering low over the North Sea, and when I looked I could see them; the giant round lamps fixed underneath them glowing cherry-red through the plumes of steam from the water. They were crawling northwards, trying to slow the march of the ice, and they left curling streaks of clear dark water behind them. But the air was stinging cold on my face and ahead of those few ships there was so much white.

It was a good time in Earth's history to be a polar bear. Unless the rumours were true about the Morrors eating them.

*

I did have *some* friends at Muckling Abbot, though I might have given you the impression I hadn't. And it was just now hitting me that I wouldn't be seeing them again for years, if at all.

I found Dot and Lizzy in our dorm. They'd had the same idea as me about skipping assembly and were sitting on the beds and watching videos on their tablets.

'Are you OK?' asked Lizzy. 'What did Miss Clatworthy want?'

'She wasn't ghastly, was she?' asked Dot, who said things like 'ghastly' on account of being just as posh as Annabel and Finty, without ever being so snotty about it.

'It was just army stuff,' I said, looking at the floor and the ceiling and the video of patriotic cats rather than at my friends' faces.

'Do you at least know where you're going yet?' asked Dot.

'Oh . . . haha, sort of . . .' I said. 'What about you?'

Lizzy snorted glumly. 'In the government programme. Staying with some random family in Cornwall.'

'Cornwall's supposed to be nice!' I said rather too brightly.

'Still don't know for sure,' said Dot. 'But I've got cousins in the south of France.'

'Oh, that's brilliant!' I said. 'It's still even sunny there, isn't it?'

'Sometimes. Supposedly. But Alice, where are you being evacuated?'

So I told them. There was a pause and then they both started being nice about it.

'Well, that's . . . cool,' said Lizzy. 'You'll probably see some really interesting stuff.'

'And the robots,' Dot said.

'Yeah, the robots,' I said. 'But it won't be that great being stuck on a rock with hardly any oxygen and no way home. They're using us for an experiment, really.' Which was true but I said it because I didn't want it to seem like this amazing special treatment I was getting and they weren't. But that didn't work very well because it *was* amazing special treatment I was getting and they weren't. Although I would have preferred to go to the south of France.

Dot and Lizzy said they wouldn't tell anyone and I don't think they did. But it didn't really make much difference, because the next morning a lot of buses turned up at the school gates and it became rather conspicuous that I was not getting on to any of them. People started looking at me in a suspicious and accusing way and I could hardly stand it. Of course, they guessed something was up and that it must be something to do with who my mum was. And I almost felt glad Annabel Stoker and Finty Carmichael used to give me a hard time, because in the end the EEC thought my life was worth more than theirs and it wasn't fair. And so they'd kind of been right about me all along.

Finally the last bus pulled away and everyone had gone, except for the people boarding up the windows and Mrs

Skilton, who seemed to be the person who'd got stuck with me until someone from the EEC came. Mrs Skilton was my favourite dinner lady, not because she was nice but because she was gloomy and dour and silent and didn't prance around the dining hall chirruping about how everyone who did not eat up every scrap was basically evil because think of the starving Canadians.

Mrs Skilton grunted with vague contempt – either for me or for the universe in general – and then stood there on the terrace smoking a cigarette and glowering balefully into the icy distance. Which was pretty much what I'd been doing the day before on the battlements, so I didn't judge and wandered off on my own, and she didn't stop me.

It was sort of interesting seeing Muckling Abbot with no one in it, although lonely too, and I went into all the places I hadn't been allowed before. I went into the staffroom and ate some biscuits I found there. I drew a little picture of the Earth on the wall in green biro with an arrow pointing to it and next to it I wrote, 'ALICE DARE WAS HERE.' And I wondered if anyone would ever find it or if the school would fall down under all the snow and ice before that happened.

Then Mrs Skilton bawled that the EEC man was here and I went down to the drive and there was a jeep painted in whitish-grey camouflage and a young soldier waiting for me.

Mrs Skilton dragged on her cigarette and announced fiercely, 'I don't *hold* with messing about on *other planets*,'

which rather took me aback, and then she grimaced in farewell and stomped off.

I got into the jeep and we drove away and I knew I'd never see Muckling Abbot again. And I never did.

The soldier's name was Harris and amazingly he did not say a single thing about my mum and I quite liked him. He glanced back at Muckling Abbot's icy towers and grinned and said, 'Wow, my school was mainly portakabins,' and I said my primary school in Peterborough had been much more like that too, but presumably on Mars it would be something else altogether.

'So, you'll be safe out of the fighting for four years,' he said, when I'd finished explaining the new arrangements for my future.

'Yes. Well. In theory.' I tried not to think about all the various things that could go wrong between Lincolnshire and Mars. 'It's a privilege, I'm very lucky,' I added dutifully.

'But, in return, you have to join the army.'

'Yes.'

'Even though you're *twelve*.'

'Yes.' It sounded awfully grim put like that, for all Miss Clatworthy's cooing about how brilliant it was. 'They're only going to be training us,' I said. 'It's just, we've got to start young so we can be this new wave of special fighters or whatever. I won't be actually up against Morrors until I'm oh, *at least* sixteen.'

'Hmm,' said Harris, and made a face as if something smelled bad.

'Everyone's in the army,' I said. '*You're* in the army.'

'I wasn't when I was twelve. And I did have a choice.'

'Well, that was a long time ago, wasn't it?' I said. Because he was grown up.

This did not cheer Harris up particularly, so I asked him what he'd been doing in the war and he sighed and said he hadn't been doing anything for a long time because he'd been hurt by Morror shockrays over Norway and had only just got better. 'And after all that, look what they've got me doing. Ferrying little kids about.'

He smiled and I got the impression he was actually pretty pleased to be ferrying kids about, compared to some of the stuff he could have been up to.

We drove through a few little villages, some of which were completely abandoned to the cold, but some still busy and pretty with their snow-covered roofs, and except for the queues outside shops everything looked as if there was no war with aliens going on at all.

'Still, seeing *Mars*, though,' mused Harris, as if he'd been carrying on a debate about it in his head. 'That's something. Are you excited?'

I said, 'Yes,' automatically because life is generally easier if you answer such questions the way the person asking them obviously wants you to, but I really hadn't been excited until then because I'd been busy thinking about Lizzy and Dot and Miss Clatworthy and Mum and about having to be in the army myself and other such considerations. Still it was a good question because it made

me wonder for the first time if I *could* be excited. After all, I was going to be one of the first children living on another planet; anyone ought to be at least mildly excited about that. So I cheered up a bit and made an effort to stay that way.

We drove for about three hours or so, and eventually the snow thinned out and the landscape was mostly brown and grey instead of just white, and there were hundreds and hundreds of greenhouses growing food, and it was still pretty bleak but at least it was easier to play I Spy.

Then we got to an airbase in a valley somewhere in Suffolk, where there were planes and heatships and even some Auroras and Flarehawks standing around the muddy runways. And Harris said, 'Well, have fun up there,' and rather stupidly I said, 'You too,' and he smiled but his face was tight and he said he would be going north again soon and it would be good to see the rest of his squadron. But he didn't look as if he expected it to be fun.

So he drove away and a lady led me into a rec room in one of the boxy buildings where there was a snooker table and a television and a games screen.

Through the rest of the afternoon other kids turned up looking dazed and lost, until by dinner time there were fourteen of us. There were a couple of little kids and a lot of teenagers, who monopolised the games screen and the TV, so I felt a bit stuck on my own and I thought, Oh God, is it going to be like this for the next four years? Because I didn't know how many of us were going altogether.

But there was this girl called Kayleigh who was fifteen

and very excited about everything in a slightly desperate way and she had multi-coloured hair and a bag full of all sorts of things she wasn't meant to have. Most of it got taken off her later, but not before she and some of the other teenagers got fairly drunk after supper and Kayleigh had helped me dye pink streaks into my hair, which my mum probably wouldn't have let me do and Muckling Abbot definitely wouldn't. And that made me feel bold and intrepid and up for adventure. Well, relatively speaking, anyway.

So there was some unpleasantness when the soldiers found out what was going on and a corporal shouted at us for being so irresponsible and a disgrace to the Exo-Defence Force uniforms we were going to end up wearing, and after various people burst into tears because of that and other reasons, and when the boys and girls had been sorted back into their separate dormitories, we all went to sleep. And the next morning we were all packed on to a distressingly battered-looking plane and off we went to the middle of the Atlantic.

Kayleigh had cried a lot the night before, but she seemed to change mood very quickly and now she got everyone singing. And while endless cheery singalongs generally rather annoy me, I had to admit hers were better than the songs at Muckling Abbot.

*They told me pull your socks up,*
*They told me wash your face.*
*They stuck me on a rocket and shot me into space!*

*Oh captain, bless my soul*
*But your spaceship flies like a toilet bowl.*
*Oh Mum, let me come home soon,*
*'Cause I lost my knickers somewhere near the moon*

*And a shooting star flew off with my bra,*
*'Fore we ever even got to Mars.*

They played some films on the flight but I was feeling too nervous to concentrate on them and so mainly I looked out the window a lot. Underneath the plane, the world turned green and then blue and it was the most colour I'd seen in ages. Even now I'm not exactly sure where we went, but I saw what had to be the coast of Africa rolling past all huge and golden, and once a scattering of islands. And I remembered my little green biro drawing on the wall in the Muckling Abbot staffroom and my heart started pounding too hard as I thought, But that's where I'm *from*. And there's so much I don't know about it yet and what if I never come back.

At last we landed on a platform in the middle of the ocean like a small round metal island, maybe two hundred metres across. And crouching on this platform was a large spaceship shaped something like a stick insect with the name *Mélisande* on its bow. There were soldiers stationed around to stop people climbing on it, although nothing could stop the seagulls from perching all over it and pooing, which I thought was quite amusing because it

made Kayleigh's song almost prophetic.

Even with all the seagull poo, I thought it was an amazing place. There was no ice at all and the water and the sky were blue and sparkling and it was so *warm*.

Planes kept swooping down and dumping loads of children on the platform until there were about three hundred of us rattling around. There were some international games and sandwich-swapping, in the spirit of comradeship and standing united against a common foe. And there was also some international fighting, which was more in the spirit of history and tradition. But it was so sunny that after a while a lot of us just sprawled around on the painted steel, feeling completely dopey and blissful in the heat and really not wanting to go anywhere.

I was lying near the edge of the platform gazing dreamily at the glittery water, thinking that what I really wished I could do was go for a swim, when a pair of bare feet whisked right over my head and I looked up just in time to see someone leap up on to the barrier and go catapulting over it. It was too fast and the light was too bright for me to get a good look at this person, but I heard a yell like a kind of war cry and, a second later, an equally loud splash as he hit the water.

I jumped up, wondering if someone really objected to our looming Martian exile so much that he was prepared to drown himself over it. With several other kids and nearby alarmed crew members, I looked over the side. What I saw was a big fizzing patch of white bubbles, and in the middle

of it a pair of legs in jeans was waving idly in the air. Then the legs tipped over with another splash and up came the head of a stubbly-haired boy about my age, who looked maybe Malaysian or Filipino or something. He bellowed: 'EVERYONE COME IN, THE WATER'S AWESOME!'

He was Australian. He had an amazingly loud voice. I don't know how there was even room for the lungs he must have had to produce that kind of noise. And all the crew had to react pretty quickly to stop about fifty of the nearest kids from doing exactly what he said and plunging into the water right then and there. And . . . well, I guess I might have been one of them. Although I did also think that kid was an idiot. I don't know. I was torn.

So the platform crew were ordering us in their scariest military voices to get back from the edge while a forlorn little boy with tously hair was hopping about, clutching what must have been the older boy's abandoned shirt and shoes and shouting, 'Kuya . . .! Kuya . . .!'

And meanwhile the kid was happily turning another somersault and whooping and spitting spouts of water into the air until an extremely annoyed soldier stomped down a ladder to the ocean, jumped in after him and fished him out.

By the time the kid was sploshing across the deck, we were all lined up in our National Groups to stop us from acting on any more clever ideas. But I was still fairly close and honestly, I think even people in orbit could have seen that here was someone who wasn't the least embarrassed

at being hauled out in front of a couple of hundred people soaking wet with no shirt on. On the other hand the little boy clutching his shoes, who was now lined up with the other Australian kids, looked mortified.

The wet soldier turned the boy over to a sergeant who roared at him, 'NAME?'

Even when the boy wasn't actually yelling, his voice had a bit of a boom to it. He said, 'Carl Dalisay,' which was a little confusing to me because of the 'Kuya' thing.

'You think you're funny, do you, Dalisay?'

Carl Dalisay just gazed up at the sergeant with wide earnest eyes and said, 'Come on! It's my last chance to go for a swim on my own planet!'

The EDF people were all so angry I almost thought the sergeant might shoot Carl Dalisay right there as an example to the rest of us, and tell his family he unfortunately fell off the spaceship. But instead he just made him do push-ups, which Carl did, sploshily, while giggling the whole time.

After that he bounded over to the little kid, who was clearly his brother, and wrapped a damp arm round his head just to be annoying. The little one wriggled away and lamented, 'Why'd ya have to *do* things like that, Kuya?'

'Oh, what was going to happen? There was a ladder right there! I'm not *a moron*.'

'Oh yeah?' said the little kid. 'And are there hammerhead sharks? A big metal beam under the water? You don't know! And you're in massive trouble!'

'Yeah, well,' Carl-or-Kuya said. 'It was worth it.'

The little one sighed heavily and went off to try and feed a seagull.

Before any of us had really got our breath back from this incident, there was a cascade of noise from overhead – sonic boom after sonic boom – and people started pointing excitedly upwards, where sure enough a small flight of spacefighters had just punched through the atmosphere and were blazing down across the blue sky. And evidently they weren't alone up there, because as they plunged they were wheeling and swooping and dodging and firing into what looked like a completely empty sky. Except that sometimes, just for a shaving of a second when they took a hit, you could see the outline of the Morror ships – U-shaped and transparent in the rays, flickering like ghosts. A Flarehawk looped backwards from a shockray blast. There was a mixture of cheers and screams from the kids on the platform, depending on how often they'd seen this sort of thing before.

In my case? Often enough that I didn't make any noise. Not so often that my chest didn't get tight either. Spaceship battles would be very pretty, if you could forget you might be about to watch someone die.

The EDF seemed to agree that it was time to get us off the planet. All the doors of the *Mélisande* sprang open and soldiers started hurrying us inside one National Group at a time, which meant Carl and the other Australians were soon on board but there was a lot of hanging about for those of us from countries down at the bottom of the alphabet like 'United Kingdom'.

'This is ridiculous! You are going to get us all killed!' burst out a tall blonde girl in expensive sunglasses in the Swedish section. None of the EDF officers took any notice, and she subsided into complaining loudly to the few other Swedish kids.

At last I got jostled down an aisle and into a seat by a window, and at first I was too busy trying to look out to take in much about the inside of the ship. We could still *hear* the battle shrieking and booming, but no matter how uncomfortably I strained against my seat belt and pressed to the window I couldn't *see* it, which somehow made it a lot more nerve-wracking and no one was cheering at all any more.

A trio of EDF officers assembled at the front of the cabin. 'I'm Captain Mendez,' said the man in the middle. 'Everyone stay calm. You're perfectly safe. The walls of this ship are strong enough to withstand any stray shockrays.'

He had a nice reassuring voice, but the effect was rather undermined by the crewwoman next to him nodding vigorously and adding, '*Mostly* strong enough.'

Forty or so hands went up at that, but no one seemed to be in the mood to be taking questions. Captain Mendez just scowled and said, '*Thank you*, Sergeant Kawahara,' to the crewwoman and, 'We'll be leaving very shortly,' to us and then he strode away again.

And yet we didn't move. The windows flashed with the Morrors' shockrays and we just sat there. I twisted around in my seat belt trying to see what the hold-up was. The *Mélisande* must have been some kind of luxury tourist liner before the

war. It was all curved pearly surfaces and on the wall beside my head was a faded poster of a couple with champagne glasses in their hands, gazing soppily back at the Earth with the slogan 'Archangel Planetary: Taking You to the Stars!' But the shiny walls were lined with scars where the luxurious private cabins had been ripped out and sensible military fixtures had been bolted in. Now the ship was crammed with padded benches for both sitting and sleeping on. They were arranged in pairs with a table and a little curtain that could go around the two of you, and that was all the privacy you got.

But there wasn't anyone on the bench opposite me.

Why wouldn't there be someone on the bench opposite me?

The few crew members who seemed to be in charge of us kept stalking around looking tense with their communicators beeping all the time. I heard one of them whispering to another. 'We're just going to have to go without them!'

'Who's missing?' Kayleigh was saying, a few seats back from me. 'What's happened to them? Have the Morrors got them?'

'Come on, we have to move,' yelled the angry Swedish girl from before.

Instead of actually talking to us, the EDF people let the ship do it. And apparently the ship's idea of a useful contribution was to start playing twinkly music and waterfall noises. '*Please relax and stay in your seats,*' crooned a soothing, automated voice. '*Imagine a stream of healing energy flowing through you . . .*'

Outside, *something* – one of our ships or one of theirs, we didn't know – exploded. I was hurting the palms of my hands by digging my fingernails into them. I tried to remind myself that there was no particular reason the Morrors should bother with a passenger ship trying to LEAVE the planet.

Then there was a roaring sound very close that rattled everyone, but it was just an ordinary plane landing on the platform. All the crew's communicators started beeping even more furiously and finally a door opened, and twenty kids ran up into the cabin, looking rather agitated to say the least.

Before they'd even sat down, the door had slammed itself shut and there was a whirr and a lurch as the spaceship's legs retracted. And then we were moving, skimming low over the Atlantic: I looked out and saw it melt into a dark-blue blur. Already the artificial gravity was working against the drag of the natural stuff, which meant you didn't fall about as much as you would have done otherwise but felt very odd. None of us was used to it and some people were sick into the bags provided. Luckily I don't throw up very easily, but it made me feel as if I was being hit lightly but persistently all over with tablespoons.

And then we were beginning to climb. One of the new arrivals came staggering down the aisle and toppled into the seat opposite me, panting. 'Hello,' she said. To my surprise, she was English too.

'Nice to meet you,' I said, as we shot upwards into the flashing blue sky.