

Starship Malaysia: Lies that Save Lives

Keith Costelloe

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In the thriller Starship Malaysia, a displaced teenager faces down malevolent abductors with the help of new friends.

In Keith Costelloe's thriller *Starship Malaysia*, a grieving teenager is caught up in the machinations of a sex trafficking ring.

In the early 1980s, Scott is haunted by dreams in which his father and stepmother are killed in an accident. When the dreams come true, he's unable to cope with the losses. He's ushered to the care of his mother in Malaysia. Though it's the first time that Scott has met her, she and her husband welcome him into their family.

Scott adapts to life in Malaysia well, despite being the only American student at his school. He befriends Saleh and joins the volleyball team. When Saleh's sister goes missing, Scott and his volleyball friends feel compelled to find her. They learn that she was taken by a sex trafficking ring, and she could soon disappear in Thailand.

Scott is a quirky narrator who shares his story in the form of a spaceship captain's reports back to Earth. The actual recipient of his accounts is a friend in the US; Scott speaks to them, ruminating on his traumas and introducing his new friends. These recordings are empathetic and self-aware: Scott makes efforts to understand both himself and his friends and family members, and his thoughts on loss, love, and friendships are clear. Further, throughout the book, Scott uses sensory details to ground the shifting scenes. He describes tasting new foods and breaking into a kidnapping house with gusto. Still, others' voices, when they are filtered through him, sound too similar to his.

The introduction of the kidnapping subplot is abrupt in comparison to Scott's adaptation to life in Malaysia, though. In dramatic form, Scott and his friends are fast to risk their lives to find Saleh's sister. Assumptions and choices are made without textual support, including a pronouncement that the local police are corrupt and the teenagers' decision not to rely on adults; the teenagers prove unusually capable against their adversaries too. Scott's story becomes larger than life as he tries to find the men responsible for the kidnapping and break up their trafficking ring. As he nears his ultimate task, Scott has to confront the consequences of risking his friends' lives as well. His takeaways are satisfying.

Working toward an emotional and pensive conclusion, the thriller *Starship Malaysia* follows a displaced teenager as he faces down malevolent abductors with the help of new friends.

JOHN M. MURRAY (March 14, 2023)

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