

Marloes Morshuis

The Shadows of Radovar

Chapter 1 - 4

Sample Translation
by Antoinette Fawcett

May

Jona's lungs were on fire. The stairs seemed endless. She bent over, gasping for breath. Kilian was already half a flight of steps ahead, but he rushed down and grabbed her hand.

'Come on. Just eight floors to the roof.'

'And then?'

'Do you trust me?' Kilian asked.

Jona nodded. There were just four people in Radovar she trusted blindly, and Kilian was one of them, even though she hadn't known him long. Then Zalman. Nanna. And Mum.

Boots were pounding on the staircase. Tears sprang to her eyes.

'It's pointless now. They're after us!'

'No. Listen. They're going down. No one's expecting us to go up.'

'And I don't understand why we're...'

Kilian pulled Jona up. 'No time! We've got to keep moving!'

Jona gasped for breath, trying to get as much air into her lungs as possible, and pressed her fist against her tummy to get rid of the stitch in her side. As she ran after Kilian her leg muscles felt as if they were bursting.

143. Their escape bid had started on the 126th floor of Radovar Sunrise. Twenty-four flights of stairs up to the roof. Just seven floors to go and then they'd be standing on top of the highest building of the city, five hundred metres above the ground. But what then? In a film they'd be carried off by eagles who'd fly them to their eyrie high in the mountains of Radovia. But this wasn't a film. And the birds of Radovia were all black. The only claws that would grip them would be those of the Grey Brigade. Skyflying – flying off the edge, never to return – perhaps that really was the best solution.

Somewhere downstairs she could hear the sound of a door slamming. Then footsteps started thundering up the stairs below – and now they were swiftly coming closer.

'They know we're going up,' Jona gasped out. Her throat was like sandpaper. Every rasping breath hurt her. 'I can't go on anymore. Really. Just leave me. Go!'

Kilian didn't answer, but grabbed hold of her arm and dragged her up the steps with him. He looked so furious that Jona felt even more frightened than she already was. She gave a cry, then rushed up the last flights of stairs with all her remaining strength.

149. The footsteps were coming closer. 150. Red arrows pointed the way to the emergency exit and the roof of the Sunrise Building. Jona pushed the door open. She felt the wind buffeting against her, tugging at her curls and clothes, blowing tears into her eyes. Kilian tightened the straps of his rucksack, took hold of her arm and dragged her to the edge of the roof with him.

The wind seemed to die down for a moment and Jona experienced a strange sense of calm. Kilian had no plan. This was the end. She looked around her. It was high and solitary where they were standing, surrounded by pure blue sky and racing clouds. In the far distance, through a tear in the blanket of fog below, she could see a thin line of sea – or maybe she simply hoped it was there. How she would have loved to have gone to the seaside, just once in her life. Nothing but water and air around you, far from the city's shadows.

Kilian swung her round and held her tightly against him, tighter than he'd ever done before. Over his shoulder Jona could see the door opening and Grey Brigaders running onto the roof. Her body seemed to explode in a wild shriek. No! She couldn't fly. She didn't want to skyfly. Images raced through her mind at gale-force speed. Dark tunnels, fragile pink flowers, screeching flocks of jet-black birds, Zalman gazing at her with pity: oh, lassie.

She tried to struggle out of his grip, but Kilian held her even more closely.

'Hold tight!' he yelled into her ear. 'I won't let you go!'

Jona threw her arms around him. For the first time. And the last.

She fell backwards into the empty void.

March – TWO MONTHS EARLIER

Jona was standing at the edge of the roof. The ground was about two hundred metres below her, but she couldn't actually see it. A grey smog blanketed the streets of the city, as it almost always did. All around her buildings poked their tops above the fog, row upon row of them, as far as the eye could see. Dozens of buildings. Hundreds. Impossible to count.

A breeze played through her curly hair and the sun warmed her face. Here, on the roof of Starlight, she could evade the shadows of the city. Sometimes she'd imagine that she was standing on a mountain top. Then the apartment buildings surrounding her were other mountains and the narrow streets between them were ravines.

She looked down. The grey cotton-wool blanket below her sometimes looked so soft and inviting. Come on. I'll catch you.

'You're weren't thinking of skyflying, were you?'

Zalman. He grabbed hold of her shirt and pulled her roughly away from the edge. She whirled round to look straight into the single eye of Starlight's handyman.

'Don't stand so close to the edge, lass. Otherwise I'll have to put a new lock on the roof door. Don't you know how uptight the GovBoard are? They're scared there'll be more skyfliers. And that would be bad for Starlight's Score. If they get wind of the fact that I let you visit the roof, me and Mitzi will be on the streets tomorrow.'

Jona sat down on the edge of an air-conditioning unit. 'Don't worry. I'm not going to skyfly. That's not my style.'

Zalman gave her a searching look. Jona tried not to avoid his gaze. She still couldn't stop a little shudder going through her whenever she saw him. The white of his single eye was yellowish, with a network of little red rivers in it and a watery blue island. The other eye was more or less completely hidden by wrinkled skin. At its lower edge there was a white border, as if the blind eye was secretly trying to peep out. The little bit of hair he had grew from his ears and the top of his head was covered in irregular pink patches.

Zalman was the only inhabitant of Minus-11, the lowest SubFloor. His one-room flat was hidden deep under the ground, among all the technical installations of the building. He was the only person in Starlight who didn't have a scoreboard by his front door. 'Because I can't sink any lower,' Zalman said, but Jona knew this wasn't true. There were plenty of families who had been shifted to the UnderUrbs because they didn't even have enough points to live on Starlight's SubFloors.

Perhaps the GovBoard let Zalman alone because he wasn't anything like the other inhabitants of Starlight. The last thing he wanted was to be a Surfacer. He potted along the

corridors, repairing something here and something else there, checking pipes and cables, and then, when he'd had enough of that, he would dig down in his hidey-hole on Minus-11. Her father had recently called him a half-blind mole.

Everyone in Starlight avoided him. Except Jona. He made her feel at ease. Perhaps precisely because he had only one eye, like Tibbar, the cuddly toy her Nan had given her when she'd been born. Zalman looked at her sidelong, just like Tibbar, and that made her feel everything would be okay.

Zalman was her friend. The only friend she had in Starlight.

'We're moving up to Plus-28 today,' Jona said.

'Well well. Just another 28 floors to go and you'll be at the Topmost! And then I won't let you visit the roof anymore, lassie, because you'll be in the High Risk Zone.' Zalman gave a hearty laugh, but they both knew it wasn't a joke. Almost no one talked about it, but everyone in the city knew the stories of the Skyfliers of Radovar. In Starlight too. Every year there were a couple of skyfliers – always people who lived on the Topmost Floor. The GovBoard never made an announcement. You couldn't find anything about it on StarNet. But it wasn't difficult to put two and two together. A Grey Brigade Squad cleaning things down in the streets; a family demoted to ZeroScore and banished from Starlight: it was easy enough to work out what had happened.

'Know anyone on Plus-56? They're all nervous wrecks. You can almost see the stress dripping from the walls. There's so little movement to the TopUrbs that most families sink back to a Lower Floor before they even get the chance. Some poor devils can't stand it and prefer to choose the quickest route down. Problem in the system,' Zalman said.

Jona shrugged her shoulders. 'That's not the only problem.'

'You will make sure you don't ever say anything like that to someone else, lass? Because you'll be in deep trouble before you know it, with yet more MinusPoints to your name. So just focus your mind on the Upmoval, and enjoy it!'

'Upmoving?' Jona snorted. 'Personally speaking, I couldn't care less. But I'm pleased Nanna will get her own room. Her snoring's getting louder.'

'Remind me. How old is your Nan now?'

'She'll be seventy-five next week. Why?'

Zalman screwed his one eye tightly shut and clenched his fists.

'Why?' she asked again, insistently.

Zalman opened his eye again and unclenched his hands. 'Nothing,' he said softly. 'Spoil her a bit, won't you? And now, hurry up. If you don't Upmove in time, then you'll miss the Light Ceremony. And that costs Points. Off with you.'

Jona nodded and stood up. Her Dad and younger brother would never forgive her if they started life on Plus-28 with a load of MinusPoints.

39,187. The numbers on the scoreboard by the front door of Jona's flat were flickering green. Next to the numbers you could see the Upmoval date: 11th March. Today. And the words 'Up 4'. Everyone would get the message that the Berger family had accumulated enough points to move four floors up. The door was open. The little hallway was already full of boxes and bags of clothes.

'Where the heck have you been?' Her mother emerged from the living room, a pile of books in her hands.

Jona shrugged. 'Nowhere in particular.'

'Dammit, Jona! You do realize we have to hurry, don't you? Or we'll be too late for the Light Ceremony!'

'Yeah. I'm here now, aren't I?'

'What kept you?'

'Do you want me to start packing then, or stay here nattering? If so, I'll never be ready on time.'

Jona saw her mother's eyes narrow. She took a step back.

'Jona?' She could hear Nanna's soft voice coming from the living room.

'Hiya, Nanna!' Jona called and walked past her mother to the room she shared with Jimmy and her Nan. Only her own things were left there still, and the furniture, because that belonged to the apartment and was going to stay. Luckily, Jimmy wasn't there. He was probably hanging round with his mates on Plus-9, at the Skate Park. Sometimes she couldn't understand how they had the same parents. They were as different as day and night. Jimmy just accepted how things were. He was always surrounded by friends and never complained about not being allowed outside. Starlight was perfectly big enough for him, apparently. You lived there, went to school there, you could practise sports, do gaming, go to a film, buy sweets. He obviously didn't need anything else.

Perhaps it was because he was three years younger than Jona. He was just four when they were forced to leave the village. He probably couldn't even remember that when they lived there they could play out whenever they wanted. Or that their parents had very different kinds of jobs then. Her mother was a teacher, till the village emptied and the school had to close. Her father had been a computer salesman and studied programming at night. But now they'd been working for seven years at the conveyor belts on the factory floors of Starlight. Like all the other Starlight inhabitants, Ron and Marly Berger made microchips for ComView, the biggest tech company in the world. Five days a week – and often six, because if you did overtime you earned more points for the Family Score.

Jimmy probably couldn't even remember that there was no scoreboard beside their front door in the village. Or that they'd never even heard of a Family Score and that there were no such things as MinusPoints. Not even if you kicked a football through someone's window or set a frog free in class. He'd grown up in Starlight, a Star Child. He didn't know any better. Lucky for him. Or not. Jona still hadn't decided.

Jona swiftly stuffed her clothes into the plastic bags lying ready on her bed. She swept her books and papers with a single brush of her hand off the shelf and into a box. She carefully took the photo of their old house off the wall and placed it at the top of the shoebox that held all her little treasures from the village: smoothly polished pebbles from the stream; her first and only report from the village school; a mummified salamander; a photo of her friend Celia and herself splashing in puddles. Where was Celia now? Perhaps she lived somewhere close by. Not that it would make any difference, because contact with people from other buildings was impossible in Radovar. Celia might as well be living on the moon.

The last thing she did was roll up her bedclothes, pillow and all, and stuff them into a garbage bag. She placed her dear old cuddly toy on top of it. The single eye of the rabbit stared at her. 'Sorry, Tibbar,' she said, as she tied the bag. 'Here we go again.'

This was the seventh move the Berger family had made in seven years. Jona could remember the first move best of all. The images of how they left the village were etched into her soul. She could see her little brother perched on the big suitcase in the heavily loaded pull-along cart they had always used for picnics. Her feet were so sore that she'd tried to clamber onto the cart with him. She saw her father pulling her off the cart, because she was seven already and old enough to walk. And Nanna taking hold of her hand. Then the greyness of the city: the streets, the fog, the high concrete towers with their little windows. Her mother had explained that people lived in them. There had been a girl standing at one of the tower windows. She'd waved at her, thinking they could perhaps be friends. But they passed another 63 towers before they reached the City Offices.

Then there was a long queue of people, a woman with a moustache at a desk, hard chairs where she lay down to sleep. But the strongest memory was of how happy she'd been when her father shook her awake and cried out: 'We're going home now!' And her mind had turned to the swing in the tree, the stream full of little fishes, the skylight in her bedroom through which she used to peep out at the moon. But her father was waving a folder of papers and saying: 'We're in luck. We've got a place in the MidUrbs! The Starlight Building in CosmoUrb. From now on everything's going to change.'

He was right. From then on nothing at all was the same.

‘What are you up to? Daydreaming? Have you finished your packing yet?’ Her mother was standing at the open door of her bedroom. Jona pointed to the packed bags and boxes.

‘Great. We’ll take everything upstairs in a moment. Your Dad and Jimmy have already started with the first load. And then we’ll go straight to the Light Ceremony. Seven new Surface families at one go! The Keller family will be over the moon! At last they’ve got a Score that lets them live Above,’ Marly said. ‘How long has it taken them? Five years? I can’t bear to think of us living in that dark hole for so long.’

Jona didn’t answer. Her mother knew perfectly well that the Keller family had lived exactly five years, four months and two weeks on one of the SubFloors. Everyone in Starlight knew that. The GovBoard calculated the Family Scores every Friday, then announced them on StarNet. The Family Score was a complex accumulation of points for work performance, school marks, bonuses for voluntary work and good behaviour. Minus the MinusPoints, of course.

The Keller family had established a new record: there’d never been any other family in Starlight who’d lived for so long at one single stretch on a SubFloor. In the past few years people had even been placing bets on it: would this be the week when the Kellers finally managed to Upmove? But whenever the Keller family almost had enough points to move above the Surface, something would happen that made their score slip. No other family had their scores so closely followed as the Kellers.

‘That lad of theirs is in your class, isn’t he? Lars, right?’

‘Matt. As you well know.’

‘Yes. Him. Is he a troublemaker?’

‘No, of course not. He’s just normal. A bit boring, really.’ Matt’s big mouth and his bad grades must have got him plenty of MinusPoints, but that wasn’t her mother’s business.

‘So Matt’s boring, is he? Ha ha, like the rest of the Keller family, clearly. Anyway, it’s a relief that you and Jimmy try your best for our own family. We’re lucky to have you,’ Marly said. She had sat down on Nanna’s stripped bed and was staring out of the window. Not that there was much to see outside. The vague outline of Moonbeam, separated from Starlight by a narrow air well, was dimly visible through the smog of sea fog and factory smoke that nearly always wrapped the city in its suffocating blanket.

Marly turned her gaze away from the window and patted the mattress. ‘Come and sit with me a moment, won’t you?’ Jona reluctantly sat down by her mother.

‘I know you don’t always find it easy, here in Starlight. But you do know we had no choice in the matter, don’t you? And look how quickly we’re climbing Up! We’ll be in a TopUrb before you know it, and we’ll have just as much freedom as we did in the village. We just have to keep working at it.’

‘For how long though? Ten years or so? Shame that Nanna won’t be here then.’

For a split second Jona thought her mum was going to punch her. She was clenching her fists so tightly that the knuckles were white. Jona shifted away from her a little, but her mother simply sighed and opened her fingers.

‘I know Nanna really misses the freedom of the village. You’re like her, Jona. You’re both free spirits. You have to feel the wind in your faces. Do you think I don’t find it awful to see how you’re both suffering? But Nanna understands what’s best for the family. She’d give up anything for us.’

‘Even her life?’

‘You always exaggerate so much! All you remember are the flowers, and the fishes, and your friends in the village. But there wasn’t anything left for us there, Jona. No work, no food, no future. We were like rats in a trap. Can’t you remember that?’

‘We could’ve gone somewhere else though, couldn’t we? There have to be better places in Radovia than this. And we still could move somewhere else.’

‘No. You don’t understand. We had one single chance to get work and a home in Radovar. If we hadn’t grabbed that chance, then you’d be much worse off. We’d have been put in one of the UnderUrbs. And we’d have started with a ZeroScore. Would you really have wanted that?’

Jona didn’t reply. She didn’t budge when her mother took her hand. ‘Try to see the bright side of things a little more, Jona. Don’t you remember when we became Surfacers? It was one of the best days of my life.’ Marly sounded almost dreamy.

Well, that’s logical, Jona thought, being happy to see daylight when you’ve been forced to live below the ground in the darkness of the SubFloors for your first two years in Radovar. But she said: ‘For me too. It was my ninth birthday.’

‘That’s right!’ her mother exclaimed. ‘You had two presents: a home above the ground *and* a party!’

Jona thought back to the Light Ceremony which was held for them. They were invited onto the stage with the other lucky families. There was cake. Their names slid along the LED news displays in the building and they were even presented with a gift: special glasses to protect their eyes against the light. She remembered how she’d wanted to dance with joy the whole day and how she told everyone: ‘And today’s my birthday too!’ Till her father told her to stop focusing so much on herself. It was an important day for everyone, not just for her. After that she didn’t say another word.

‘Yes, that was a very unusual birthday,’ Jona said to her mother. She stood up and picked up the shoebox. ‘Can we go now?’

Later that afternoon Jona was in Starlight Square with her parents, Jimmy and Nanna to watch the Light Ceremony for the new Surfacers. Starlight Square took up the whole of the 10th floor of the Starlight Building. It was paved with flagstones and there were benches, but any resemblance to a real city square stopped there. The murals showing trees and houses with little balconies and climbing roses simply emphasized its fakeness. The carefully arranged pots of artificial plants made it even worse. Perhaps a little breeze might have helped the illusion, but in Starlight none of the windows could be opened. The air constantly felt stale. Second-hand air, Jona always thought, as if all the oxygen had already been breathed in by someone else.

The Square was used for large gatherings like the Light Ceremony and it was also a meeting place for the inhabitants of Starlight. But Jona wasn't the only one who felt melancholic there. The Square was often deserted. Only the people who lived on the SubFloors regularly visited it, to escape their windowless apartments.

But it was crowded now. The Keller family were standing on the stage in the centre of the Square, along with six other families. Jona noticed Matt trying to make himself as invisible as possible to all the thousands of Starlighters gaping at him.

'Your contribution to the Starlight Community has earned you a place in the light. The Governors of Starlight and all its inhabitants wish you a sunny future!' Charles Fickers, the GovBoard Chair, pressed the red button. The enormous round lamp above the stage came on and the brand-new Surfacers were bathed in a fierce yellow light. They blinked their eyelids. Everyone started cheering and clapping.

Jona closed her eyes and tried to remember the way the wind on the roof had felt that morning, blowing through her hair. But what she actually felt was the breath of the throng of people all around her. The compulsory Light Ceremonies every Saturday morning were a weekly low for her. But if you missed them you'd be presented with a bill in the form of MinusPoints for 'anti-social behaviour'. Her Star Pass was always scanned at the entrance to the Square, but in order to convince people that she was especially dutiful, she always stayed a while with her family. She would let spying eyes see how hard she was clapping for the new Surface Families, before swiftly slipping off to her hiding place.

Today, as on other days, she wriggled unobtrusively through the crowd during the applause and slid herself into the corner between the artificial palms and the wall. Before the crowd streamed out of the Square, she should appear again. Woe betide her if her father thought she'd left before the end of the ceremony. She didn't want another lecture about the wonderful opportunities their family had been given in Radovar. They weren't asking her to

do much, were they? Just get good grades at school, stay out of trouble, and do her best for the Starlight Community. And if she thought that was too much, while her parents had to slave away to give her the best possible chances, then she was clearly a lost case. Did she want to end up like Zalman? Living deep below the surface and avoided like the plague? Or did she want the Berger family to be banished from Starlight and sent to an UnderUrb because of her? When her dad went on like this, Jona mostly held her tongue and gazed at the little bubbles of froth that always appeared in the corners of his mouth when he was mad at her. Then as soon as he'd run out of things to say, she'd slip off to one of her hidey-holes.

That's how she'd met Zalman. She'd got a fail grade in Geography which had cost the family twenty MinusPoints, and her father had exploded with anger. She'd fled from the flat, wanting to disappear into the deepest, darkest bolthole she could find. And so she had taken the lift down to Starlight's lowest SubFloor, Minus-11. When she got there, she crept behind some pipes. She'd almost screamed out in fright when Starlight's new handyman suddenly appeared right in front of her, but he had taken her with him, to his dingy little one-room apartment, given her a cup of tea, and cheered her up with his biggest secret: Mitzi, the rat he had tamed. That was the day Zalman became her friend.

Jona was peeping out through the plastic palm leaves. The Light Ceremony was over and the Square was emptying. A group of her Star Academy classmates stood some distance away. She swiftly slipped out from behind the palms and attached herself to the group. The only one who noticed her was Pat, a nerd she sometimes did programming with after school. 'Jona! Have you been here all the time?'

'I was with my family.' She nodded towards the stage, where her parents were talking to the Kellers.

Leyla, a girl with long blonde hair, living on Plus-40, came by. 'You've Upmoved today, right? To Plus-28. Fantastic! Hey, why don't you drop by one day? Me and my brothers have got our own separate rooms and we don't ever have to wash up anymore.'

'Do you get maids on Plus-40, then?' Pat asked.

'No, dishwashers!'

'Wow!' Jona said. 'But, hey, I have to get going.'

'Hang on, won't you? Listen, a group of us are going to CineStar tonight. They're showing a new film. Why don't you come too?' Pat gave her a pleading look from behind his black dreads.

'Yeah,' Leyla said. 'Why don't you join us?'

'Sorry, I've still got to unpack my stuff. Have a great time, though!'

Jona went across to her parents, shook hands with the Kellers and the other new Surfacers, walked past the lifts and the queues of waiting people, then ran all the way up the eighteen flights of stairs to their new flat on Plus-28.

After each Moval Jona always played a little game: 'find the ten differences'. All the flats they'd lived in were alike, except, of course, that on Minus-8 and Minus-2 there were no windows. They had the same bookcases. The walls were always painted white. And there was always a light-grey sofa set in the living room. But the higher the floor, the more luxury there was.

There was a bath in the new apartment. An extra bedroom for Nanna. More cushions on the sofas. A woollen carpet on the living room floor. The view was different too. They were now at the front of Starlight and facing Sunpower instead of Moonbeam. Not that it made much difference: every building in CosmoUrb was a clone of the others. Whether they were called Red Giant I or II, Eclipse, Cosmium, NeoNova or Corona, they all had fifty-six PlusFloors, eight thousand inhabitants, a school, a theatre, a square, shops, and three factory floors where everyone over eighteen earned their points and their wages. At least that's what it said on StarNet. Jona herself had never been inside another Radovar building, naturally.

She tried to get a glimpse of her neighbours in Sunpower, but the fog hadn't lifted yet and the only thing she could see were dim lights. Did they have light-grey sofas over there too? And did all the inhabitants watch TV Radovia in the evenings? Jona had once tried to work that out for herself, but very swiftly she ran up against the borders of StarNet. Even on the internet you weren't allowed to leave your own building. The whole city was full of digital walls.

Were the people living in the TopUrbs allowed to visit each other? Or ring each other up? Not that Jona had a ComPhone. You only got those when you lived on Plus-35. But Leyla had told her that these weren't much good either. The only Apps available were Starlight Apps, and the only internet was StarNet.

But perhaps that was also better in the TopUrbs. Perhaps they had ComPhones that worked like they did in the rest of the world, where according to TV Radovia they were in high demand. Zalman had told her that in the TopUrbs people could simply walk around in the streets, and they had shops there, and terraces where you could drink coffee. It sounded as if he'd been there, but Jona didn't dare to ask. The only time she'd done so, he'd clammed up and said she'd better go home, pronto.

Jona went to the room she would share with Jimmy. He was lying assertively on the bed by the window, again, but she didn't feel like arguing with him about it. She freed Tibbar from the garbage bag and put him by her pillow on the bed next to the wall.

‘You kinda fancy eyeless monsters, don’t you?’ Jimmy leaped across, snatched Tibbar from the bed and threw him up several times at the ceiling.

‘More than brainless idiots, yeah. Give him back.’ Jimmy flung Tibbar at her, but then made a grab for something in her shoebox. He held up the photo of Celia and Jona.

‘Aaaaah.... cute!’

‘Give that back.’

‘Celia’s forgotten all about you.’

‘So? Give it back!’ Jona lunged for the photo, but Jimmy quickly moved it away from her grasp.

‘Get yourself a friend in this place, then you won’t need that photo.’

‘Thanks for the advice. I’ve got all the friends I need.’

‘The ugliest handyman in the world and... let’s see. Oh dear. That’s it.’ Jimmy was grinning.

‘Have you two finished unpacking?’ Their mother was standing in the doorway. ‘We’re going to open the Welcome Letter. Are you coming?’

The living room smelled of coffee and warm apple pie. Rob was twisting the cream-coloured envelope from the Starlight GovBoard round and round in his hands. In a moment they’d know exactly which privileges were attached to living on Plus-28 Floor. Opening the Welcome Letter always reminded Jona a little of Christmas: an important festival – but a time of tension too, because there was no guarantee that there would be a present under the tree for everyone.

As soon as they were all at the table, her father tore open the envelope and unfolded the piece of paper inside it. His eyes flew across the script. Jona watched her father’s mouth curl into a smile, but immediately droop again. He threw the letter down on the table. ‘Well. We can forget about lying in on Sundays.’

Her mother picked the letter up from the table. ‘A two percent wage increase, the possibility of earning extra points for the Family Score, two weeks’ discount on the seventy-five-plus surcharge and... oh, yes... we’re allowed to go to the CosmoPark once a week. On Sunday mornings, from eight o’clock to ten o’clock. Starting tomorrow.’

Jona gave an inward cheer, but her father groaned. ‘Setting the alarm for seven o’clock so we can shiver in the cold and mud, surrounded by thousands of others. Thanks a lot. Once a fortnight was more than enough for me.’

‘Then stay at home, Dad,’ Jona said.

‘You know damn well that’s not possible. We have to show we’re grateful for the privileges the GovBoard grants us. I *am* grateful, I mean, and if we want to get even higher in Starlight, then we’d better let them see it.’

Jona picked the letter up from the table. 'What's a seventy-five-plus surcharge? Has that got anything to do with Nanna?'

Her mother snatched the letter from her hands. 'That's an administrative matter.'

'But Zalman asked me something about Nanna's age too.'

'Are you still hanging around with that guy? Get a friend of your own age, can't you?'

Jona's father stood up. 'I'm going to bed now. It seems we'll have to get up early tomorrow. Good night.'

Jona didn't respond. When her father was in that kind of mood, there was no point. The table trembled as he slammed the door behind him.

Jimmy stuffed two pieces of apple pie inside him. 'Cool, hey? And are there any nice surprises for me in that letter?'

'Well, all your satisfactory grades at school count for double points on the Family Score.' Marly hesitated a moment. 'But your fails will earn us double MinusPoints. Perhaps you should make a start on your homework for Monday?'

Jimmy pushed his chair back so violently that it fell over, then stormed out the door. Christmas was nicer after all, Jona thought. She looked at Nanna, who had fallen asleep again in the chair by the window. At Christmas a few months ago they'd spent time together cutting out pictures of flowers to decorate the artificial Christmas tree. Then they'd sprayed pine-scented room freshener everywhere and had giggled with each other as Rob paced the flat for hours, sniffing and snuffling. But since Nanna had been stopped from going to the CosmoPark with them, she hardly laughed at all. One day Nanna had shrieked her way through the park, trying to chase off the black birds, and then the Starlight GovBoard had kindly requested the Berger family to leave her at home. After that she didn't do much else all day long except sit in her chair by the window. Every day she looked smaller and more wrinkled, as if slowly and surely she was shrinking from a grape to a currant.

'What do you mean, the surcharge is just an administrative matter?' Jona asked her mother.

'It's nothing for you to worry about. Just focus on her seventy-fifth birthday. We're going to have a wonderful celebration.'

'But how? Look at her, won't you? It's not going at all well for her. You can't simply shut Nanna up. She's withering away. You know she's missing the village.'

'It's a shame it's forbidden to have plants in Starlight,' her mother said. 'Even if she just had a few little flowers to take care of. There are so many good things about Radovar, but I do find some of the rules a bit over the top.'

Jona burst out laughing, but her laughter sounded shrill and false. 'A bit? What kind of idiot invents rules like these?'

‘You mustn’t say things like that, Jona! We know how bad things were in Radovar before President Starkin implemented the Great Clean-up. And then Mayor Havers built the whole city up again, from scratch.’

‘As if a few harmless little plants are filthier than all the concrete and asphalt they’ve filled the city with. Are they suffering from some kind of weird bacteriophobia?’

‘You’d think so, wouldn’t you, with all those Grey Brigaders keeping the streets clean.’ Her mother covered her mouth with her hand in shock.

‘Tut tut, Mum. You’re not allowed to say things like that!’ Now Jona was really laughing.

Marly ruffled Jona’s curls. ‘We’ll have to accept all of this for the time being, I’m afraid. But luckily you can race around outside every week on Sundays now. Perhaps we should take photos for Nanna, then she can enjoy the park a little too.’

Jona nodded absent-mindedly. Suddenly she knew the perfect present for Nanna’s birthday.

The morning air felt fresh against Jona's skin. It was just nine o'clock and the March sun wasn't strong enough yet to drive off the nightly cold. But Jona loved this coolness. The temperature in Starlight was an unvarying 20° centigrade. She always felt a little sticky there. Perhaps that's why she was constantly dreaming about the sea. How the waves would wash away the dust of the city, how her body would tingle with coldness and salt. How she'd vanish into the depths, with nothing around her but midnight-blue water. A sea of silence.

She drew the cold air deep into her lungs, then blew it out in little clouds. Stalks of grass tickled her neck. On the branches, high above her head, there was a light-green haze. Two weeks ago the trees were still bare, but spring was coming quickly now. She closed her eyes. Water gurgled somewhere close by. Jona imagined she was lying in a mountain meadow, beside a waterfall splashing onto rocks. The ball that smacked against her head swiftly returned her to the CosmoPark. It was always jam-packed in the park, even on Sundays at nine in the morning. After all, there was only one park for all the inhabitants of CosmoUrb – and most of them had their visits scheduled on Sunday.

She hoisted herself up. Jimmy was over there chasing his football. She couldn't see her parents at all. They were probably in the café on the hill. The cappuccino there was the only thing her father liked about the park. There couldn't be a better moment to sort out Nanna's present. She brushed the stalks of grass off her neck and walked behind the hill, where there was a thickly-grown area with little paths winding through bushes and beds of flowers. Jona searched through the flower-beds for a plant that Nanna would find attractive. Very quickly her eye fell on a specimen with delicate pink flower buds which reminded her of the little stones in Nanna's favourite pair of earrings.

She loitered around till the family in front of her turned the corner. The boys perched in a tree some distance away weren't paying attention to her, nor were the couple kissing in the rhododendrons. There was an old man shuffling along a little further off, but the busy path would never be entirely empty. She could already hear voices coming closer. Jona unzipped her jacket and knelt down to tie a shoelace. When the man turned away for a moment, she gave a sharp tug and pulled the plant from the ground, then hid it with a few handfuls of earth in the tuck of her shirt. She trod the earth down with her shoe and pushed a few leaves over the hole. Then she tightly closed her jacket, went back to the grass lawn, and waited by the fountain for the ten o'clock buzzer.

She tried to control her breathing. A deep breath in, a long breath out. If she stayed calm, she had nothing to fear. No one was ever frisked at the exit. Then she leaped almost half a metre into the air as she felt a hand on her shoulder. 'Jimmy! You little beggar!' she shouted.

But standing behind her were a man and woman in green overalls with garden-rake badges. Compared to the Grey Brigaders who kept the streets clean, the Green Brigaders, who looked after the parks, had an almost friendly air. Jona often saw the Grey Brigade rolling through the streets in their metallic grey four-wheel drives. Their emblem was a broom, but everyone who read the news bulletins on StarNet knew that they cleared up more than just street garbage. Groups of tramps, for example, making their way into the MidUrbs from the UnderUrbs. Recently a troop of Grey Brigaders had marched on foot past them as they were walking to the park. As respectable MidUrbers, out of doors at the right time, they had nothing to fear, but the mere sight of their heavy boots and reflective sunglasses made a shudder run down her spine. But no one was afraid of the Green Brigaders. They just lumbered along, happily raking and weeding the parks. Jona sometimes even chatted to them. But now the look in their eyes was as hard as steel.

‘Come with us a minute,’ the woman said, ‘then you can give back what doesn’t belong to you.’

‘Where are your parents?’ the man asked.

‘Don’t know.’ Jona’s voice sounded weird and strangely distant. ‘Drinking coffee, maybe.’

‘Name and building?’

‘Jona Berger, Starlight.’

More and more people were standing staring at her. Jimmy was one of them, she noticed. And the old man she’d seen on the path. He was busy talking and he pointed in her direction. When her gaze crossed his, she saw a glint of triumph in his eyes. The Brigaders took her with them to the Park Office by the entrance. The woman escorted her into a little room.

‘Open your jacket.’ Jona’s fingers felt frozen. ‘Hurry up. Otherwise I’ll do it for you.’

She opened her coat. The plant fell onto the ground.

‘Ah. The *Dicentra Formosa*.’

Jona looked confused. The woman picked the plant up from the floor. ‘A Bleeding Heart. That’s the name of the plant you have stolen. Very appropriate. If you carry on like this, you’ll make plenty of hearts bleed. Your parents’ to begin with.’

‘It was a present for my Nanna. She’s seventy-five in a few days’ time.’

‘Seventy-five!’ The woman had a peculiar expression on her face. Was it sympathy? But it vanished again in a flash.

‘She’s not allowed to go to the park anymore because she’s acting a bit strangely now. But that’s just because she’s missing the village. The flowers.’

The door opened. The man from the Green Brigade entered with her father and mother. Marly looked shocked. Rob’s face was bright red.

‘Your daughter has been caught stealing a plant, a Dicentra Formosa to be precise. Her intention was to smuggle it illegally into a building and give it to her grandmother as a birthday present.’

‘Jona!’ Rob gasped. ‘Was this your idea?’ he asked his wife.

‘Of course not! As if I’d let her steal anything!’

‘It’s not just a question of stealing, Mrs Berger. You must know about the Flora and Fauna Law, paragraph 2 sub-section 1. It is strictly forbidden to keep living plants or animals in Radovar. You haven’t any idea how much difference that makes to this city in terms of absenteeism caused by sickness.’

‘Aren’t you exaggerating a little? I can’t imagine how a little plant would make us sick,’ Marly said. Rob changed from bright red to purple.

‘Fortunately, you’re not the one making the rules in this city. We heed the advice of microbiologists and botanists. It’s already risky enough letting people be exposed to nature in our parks. But if we permitted flora and fauna in the buildings, it would be the end.’

‘But...’ Jona’s mother said, before getting a poke in the ribs from her husband.

‘Parents should give a good example. Now I understand why things have gone so amiss with your daughter. Of course, we can’t leave this unpunished.’

‘My daughter meant well. It was really foolish of her, but we’ll make sure it never happens again.’ Jona hated the servile tone in her father’s voice. She wanted to jump up and say she would do it again, given half a chance. But the warning in her mother’s gaze restrained her.

The woman asked for Jona’s Star Pass, sat herself down at the computer and typed in some details. It seemed an eternity before she looked up from the screen. ‘We’ll let it rest at a penalty of five hundred MinusPoints for the moment. An expensive little visit to the park.’

A summery of the full novel is available in a separate document.

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