The House After Us

A *story*

N. Van Seters & ChatGPT

1

The woman who wanted to buy the hotel asked where the wall could come out.

Mina had expected questions about the roof. She knew the roof's entire history, including a repair her father had paid for twice because the first man had been an optimist. She had prepared figures. She had brought the old photographs down from the landing.

"Which wall?"

"That one."

Sanna pointed through reception, past the brass rack of keys that no longer opened anything, to the wall separating the dining room from the north lounge.

"It's structural," Mina said.

"Some of it. I've had the survey."

So had Mina. A beam could carry the load. She had put the estimate in a drawer.

"You haven't asked what the rooms are like."

"I've seen the rooms."

"The pictures aren't very good."

"I came through last month. Your daughter showed me."

Mina looked out at the square. Someone had moved the white bench from under the plane tree into the sun. In another hour the tree would have been the better choice.

"She didn't mention that."

"Perhaps she thought you knew."

The hotel stood at the bottom of Rauk's three shopping streets, where the old freight line had once entered a yard and now entered a strip of grass. Its proper name was the North Rooms, although the north rooms had been closed for eleven years. The brick on the sea side was darker than the brick facing the square. A row of hooks remained under the kitchen window from the days when fish came in by handcart and were weighed there before anybody got paid.

Mina had never weighed a fish. She still referred to the hooks as ours.

"You said somewhere to skate," she said.

"Yes."

"How many people do that?"

"At present, mostly the people doing it somewhere else."

Sanna was sixty-one, comfortably broad, wearing a coat with an excellent repair across one elbow. She had a habit of putting her hands in her pockets before answering a question, which made Mina feel she had already decided how much of the answer to give.

"Rollers," Sanna said. "A good floor. A place to sit. Music. Rooms upstairs for whoever wants them."

"Visitors?"

"People who stay. Some might visit."

"Families?"

"Possibly."

Mina waited.

"I'm not bringing children as part of the offer," Sanna said.

"I didn't suggest you were."

They looked at each other across the reception desk. The bell between them had been polished more often than rung.

From the kitchen, Oren said, "Would either of you like tea?"

Mina had forgotten to introduce him.

"My husband," she said. "One of the other owners."

"I've seen the three consents on the schedule," Sanna said.

"Two so far. Mine and his."

"Will Ren agree?"

"I haven't put this offer to him."

"Then put it to him before I spend more on the floor."

Mina nodded. Ren had agreed to the principle of selling. She had treated the principle as the difficult part.

"Hello, Oren," Sanna said, turning toward the kitchen rather than toward Mina. "Tea would be good."

"I can't carry it through."

"Neither can I until somebody makes it," Mina said.

"Then we are equally inconvenienced."

Sanna laughed. Mina went to put the kettle on.

Oren spoke through the little installation beside the kitchen clock. He could have spoken elsewhere, but that was where he had asked to be available in the hotel, and Mina had grown used to looking there. He had been Continued for nineteen years. For the first seven he and Ren had been one person. The separation had been disclosed, witnessed, and accompanied by an allocation of the property they already owned. A second person had not produced a second hotel.

They were both authentic continuations of Oren. They remembered the same first apartment, the same wet wedding, Lea's birth. Ren had since learned a language Oren did not speak. Oren had spent twelve more years in this kitchen. Mina remained married to the one who used the kitchen installation. The other had ended their marriage and chosen to be called Ren.

Oren had been her husband for seventy-eight years. She still sometimes introduced him as though he needed her to.

There were potatoes cooling beside the sink. The lunchtime special, although nobody had asked what was special about potatoes for a long time. Mina cut one open, salted it, and ate it standing up while the water heated.

"She wants the wall out," she said quietly.

"I heard."

"You sound pleased."

"I have no particular attachment to that wall."

"Your mother had the paper put up."

"My mother put it up because it was cheap."

Mina cut another potato.

"It has become expensive in retrospect," Oren said.

She took three cups down, then put one back.

"Leave it," he said.

"You don't need a cup."

"No. But you'll want somewhere to put the spoon."

She left it.

2

Lea arrived for lunch with a bag Mina recognised as the beginning of packing.

It was not large. That was how Mina knew. Large bags were for holidays and visits and an occasion that could be given a date. This was a canvas bag containing the things one took before one took the things.

"I put your books by the back door," Mina said.

"Thank you."

"Have you spoken to Ren?"

"Yesterday."

"About the hotel?"

"About a thing he's making. Then the hotel."

"He's making something?"

"He told you. The word game. You said it sounded complicated."

"I didn't know you still played."

"He makes me try the changes."

"You never mention it."

"I do."

Lea took a plum before Mina could say anything else.

"You might want to check them. I didn't know which belonged to you."

"If you put all the ones you dislike in the bag, it'll be close."

They ate in the kitchen. In the dining room, Jessa was feeding four people at a table laid for six. Jessa came three days a week because she liked the hotel and liked having three days a week that were different from the other four. She had liked it for seventeen years. Last winter she had asked Mina to find someone else for Saturdays. Mina had found someone for two Saturdays and then stopped looking.

Lea took the potatoes and turned the bowl so the cracked side faced the wall.

"Sanna said you showed her round."

"I did."

"You might have told me."

"You asked me to do the viewings."

"I asked you to do the first one because I was at the clinic."

"And the next three because you didn't like the people."

"One of them wanted to divide the dining room into storage."

"They made a proper offer. You wouldn't even let me show them the upstairs."

Mina pushed the pickled plums toward her daughter. Lea took one, inspected it with an expression she had inherited from her father, and took two more.

"Will Tavi help you move?" Mina asked.

"She's meeting me there."

"Is there enough room for all those books?"

"We're going to find out."

"How long are you going for?"

"I've taken the place."

"For how long?"

"It's a place to live, Mum."

Outside the kitchen window the grass of the old railway bent in the wind. Rauk had once had eleven thousand residents. It had rather fewer now. Nobody agreed on which previous number was the proper one to use when discussing the difference.

Its medical care was excellent. Its houses were warm. Food arrived, faults were repaired, the sea wall was maintained, and the steep steps to the upper street had acquired a lift so discreet that visitors sometimes stood at the bottom complaining there ought to be one.

What the town could not provide was the person you wanted at the next table.

Lea had been that person to Mina for most of the last nineteen years. She had also been the person who inspected the gutters, arranged the lunches, found the man who knew why the north door stuck, and drove her mother to the clinic although the transit would have done it better. Lea had stopped putting the visits in her calendar. They filled the afternoons between the things she did put in.

"You said you liked it here."

"I do."

"You could have told me before you took it."

"I'd told you I was looking."

"Looking isn't taking."

Lea put down her fork.

"We talked about this at my birthday. You asked whether Tavi would like the smaller flat on the upper street."

"It's a good flat."

"Yes, Mum."

"If I had asked you before taking it, what would you have said?"

Mina knew several answers that were fair and one that was true.

From beside the clock, Oren said, "She would have asked how long you were going for."

"Stay out of it," Mina said.

"Lea asked me to be here."

Jessa came in with two plates and stopped.

"Good time?"

"Excellent," Lea said.

"Then one of you can tell the people at table four that the fish wasn't bigger last week. They were here last week. They had soup."

Lea laughed through a mouthful of potato. Mina laughed too, and Jessa looked at both of them with the professional resentment of someone who had brought a real problem into a family scene.

After lunch, Lea carried the bag of books out to the car. Mina watched from the doorway and did not ask when she would bring the bag back.

Later she found herself waiting for her daughter to thank her for that.

3

The lounge was used on Tuesdays by people Mina did not put in the booking book.

They had begun coming during the years when Oren was dying for the first time. That was how Mina thought of those years, although he objected to the numbering. A woman from the next street had come to sit with her and brought another woman, who brought someone else, and eventually Tuesday had become a time at which one could arrive without making an appointment to explain why.

They ate, sometimes. One of them cut hair. They had once spent an entire evening trying to remember the name of a man none of them had liked. They had forgotten why they needed the name before they found it.

The room was private. That had been important to some of them, and Mina had agreed to conditions she now discovered she could not casually explain to a prospective buyer. Assistance remained available to anybody who asked for it. There was no shared account of the evenings and no record from which a new host could reconstruct what each person expected.

Three of the women had worked at the repair depot. Mina and Oren had sat on its accommodation committee, and the evenings had begun after the depot settlement. The grant that put the lift in the hotel had come from the same release of land.

It had all been settled before Ren separated from Oren. Both remembered it.

Mina had said, years ago, that there would always be a room.

She had said it while putting another log in the stove. In the depot papers there was a sentence about what Vaska's family supported. Mina remembered typing it. She put the bread over the warm part of the stove and went to fetch another plate.

On the Tuesday after Sanna's visit she brought in a plate of warm flatbread. Bera had taken the chair nearest the stove and was denying that she had moved it.

"It was over there," Neri said.

"Then somebody must have wanted it here."

"You're sitting in it."

"And very comfortable. Thank you."

Mina put the bread down between them. Vaska lifted the cloth, took the piece from underneath and passed it to her.

"Eat that before you start."

It was the first one, black along an edge. Mina tore off the burnt part. Vaska took it from her and ate it.

"You always say you like those," Mina said.

"I do like them."

"You could have told me. I could have burned the rest."

Neri reached across for the plate. She had a pair of spectacles on her head and another hanging from her neck. Bera asked which pair was for cutting hair.

"Depends whose hair."

"Mine?"

"I close my eyes for yours."

Mina laughed and pulled a chair up with her foot. Neri passed her the plate to hold while she cleared a place for it. For a while Mina sat with the bread on her knees, eating whenever someone else took a piece.

When Neri went to fetch the scissors, Mina stood and told them about the offer.

"Skating," said Bera.

"Apparently."

"In here?"

"The lounge and dining room together."

"That floor isn't fit for skating."

"She'll replace the floor."

They looked down. The floor had been replaced twice in Mina's lifetime. Nobody present had loved either replacement until the next one was proposed.

"Where would we go?" Vaska asked.

"That's what I want to discuss."

"There's a room above the dispensary," said Bera.

"They record use."

"They record whether somebody's in it. They don't record what you're saying."

"You'd have to ask."

"Then we'll ask."

Mina had come ready to comfort them. As Bera described the room above the dispensary, she found herself preparing objections to its chairs.

Vaska did not join in. She was sitting beside the stove, holding her hair away from her neck while Neri trimmed it.

"You said always," she said.

Neri stopped cutting.

"I know."

"Was it always until you sold it?"

"We can have another room."

"I know we can. The town's full of rooms."

"Then what are you asking me?"

Vaska looked at her with the weariness Mina had once known how to recognise before it became inconvenient.

"Not to tell the next owner it was something you gave us."

"I didn't know I'd sell it."

"What did you think would happen?"

Mina looked toward the wall Sanna wanted removed. There was a mark on it above the skirting where a chair had caught it. She had been meaning to repaint that section for nine years.

"I thought I'd be here."

"And when you weren't?"

Mina looked at the bread she was still holding.

"I hoped Lea would want it."

"Did you tell Lea that?"

"Of course she knew."

Neri said, "Head down. I've done one side and you're making the other difficult."

They laughed, except Vaska. Neri resumed cutting.

Mina sat down. She had expected to stand through the conversation, distributing bread and reassurance, and found that she had no reassurance left that did not make a promise on someone else's behalf.

They discussed the room above the dispensary. They discussed two other rooms. One was smaller. One smelled of cleaning fluid, although Bera pointed out that the smell could probably be changed more easily than the size.

At half past nine Vaska helped Neri into her coat. Bera had given them the number for the dispensary room.

"We're going to look on Friday," Vaska said. "Neri and me."

"I'll come. I know the man who—"

"Ten in the morning. Aren't you at the clinic?"

"I could change it."

Neri was pulling at the lining of a sleeve. Vaska held the shoulder while she got her hand through.

"Leave it," Vaska said. "We'll look. If we like it, you can go."

Mina held out the parcel of bread. Vaska took it and put it in Neri's pocket, where Neri said she would never find it again. They went out together. Mina stayed by the open door until she felt the draught on her ankles.

4

Ren had been asking about the depot settlement for years. The two Radans had inherited one vote and disagreed about using it. Mina and Oren had recommended that the registrar appoint the one who would vote for the release. Their recommendation said Vaska supported that choice. She had wanted to leave the old house. Mina had written down more than that.

Mina set the second installation on the kitchen table. Ren asked her to turn it away from the window. The sound of the square made him feel he was waiting for somebody else to arrive. Oren was beside the clock. Lea had offered to attend. Mina had said it was a discussion between the owners.

"All right," Lea had said. "Call me when you're finished."

Ren's voice was quicker than Oren's now. The vowels had altered a little with the language he was learning. He would start a sentence, hear where it was going, and change direction. Oren generally waited until Mina stopped doing whatever made the noise, then said what he had come to say.

"I've read it," Ren said. "I like the skating woman."

"Her name's Sanna."

"I know. She let me hear the music. I was worried you'd sell to someone solemn."

Mina sat down.

"Then can we have your consent?"

"To the sale, probably. Not to seven."

"The declaration," Oren said.

"Yes. We know of no outstanding challenge to the settlement. We do know. There's mine."

"Are you bringing it now?" Mina asked.

"I'm refusing to say it isn't there."

She opened the packet. The sentence looked as harmless as it had when she approved it.

"The adviser wrote that."

"She asked us. We supplied the answer."

"That settlement is older than you are."

"Than the separation."

"You know what I mean."

"I was there, Mina."

"So was I," Oren said.

She wanted to tell one of them to let the other finish. Neither had interrupted.

"Radan signed the release."

"One of him did," Ren said. "We got him chosen. That's the part."

"It was the right move," Oren said. "Vaska had packed the kitchen already. She was eating off two plates because she thought they were going on Friday."

"I remember."

"The other Radan would have held it up," Oren said.

"Probably."

"You wanted the release."

"Yes. I still wanted the registrar to choose fairly."

Mina moved the pan off the heat.

"There were reasons," she said.

"Family support was one. Our note said he had it. Vaska hadn't said that."

"She'd packed the kitchen," Oren said. "I keep coming back to that."

"So do I," Ren said.

Mina put the pan back. The potatoes were not done.

"What are you asking us to do?"

"Correct what we gave them. Ask somebody who wasn't us to look at it. Don't tell the next owner we know nothing."

"You could have done this before I wanted to leave."

Ren did not answer immediately.

"I thought talking to you counted as doing something. Then the draft came and I saw where I'd got."

"You got an answer," Oren said. "We've answered you."

"Exactly."

The kitchen clock clicked. Mina had kept its sound through every repair.

"Which of you changed?" she asked.

"I hope we both did," Oren said. "Twelve years would be a long time to do nothing."

Ren laughed. Mina did not want him to, and Oren did not ask him to stop.

They agreed to send the declaration back. Ren asked if there was any flatbread left. He could not eat it, but he liked to know whether Mina had made it and whether she had burned the first one, as she always did by beginning something else while it was in the pan.

"It's all gone," she said.

"Then you remembered the salt."

He ended his channel.

"I don't know what he really wants," Mina said.

Oren waited until the colander stopped clattering.

"He told us."

"You don't agree with him either."

"No. I'm fed up with it. I still heard what he asked for."

She drained the potatoes. One broke against the metal and left a little white flower of starch. Oren had called it that long before the separation. She caught herself wondering which one had said it.

She turned off the tap.

5

Seventeen years earlier, the new lift had arrived before the grant was released.

It lay in pieces on the dining-room floor, wrapped in pale blue material that everyone was told not to throw away. A guest touched one of the panels and asked whether it was going to be a very large refrigerator. Mina said that would have been cheaper.

"Will you charge more for the rooms?"

"Only if you use the lift."

"What about coming down?"

"That's free. We want you gone."

The guest laughed, then asked Mina to carry his case upstairs. She took it up the two flights, stopping where she usually stopped but pretending to inspect a window. The handle cut a line into her palm.

Oren had been Continued for two years. His installation stood on an upturned crate in the kitchen because the final position had not been decided. He was learning which of the tasks he had used to do Mina would now do rather than ask somebody else. Mina had told him it was no trouble. That evening he asked her to stop saying that while she rubbed her hand.

The registrar held the hearing the next morning in the depot hall.

There were chairs for people who required chairs, installations for people who did not, and a pot of coffee beyond the cables. Mina carried it round and kept nearly putting a cup in front of the two places labelled RADAN. An attendant had added the registry suffixes in smaller type.

The plans on the wall showed the replacement apartments: doors a person could open from a chair, bathrooms that did not require rearranging a marriage, windows higher than the pavement. Selling the depot houses would pay for them and for improvements elsewhere in town.

The release needed nine of thirteen membership votes. Eight had agreed, four refused. Radan's membership, inherited by both continuations, still had only one vote. They could not agree who should exercise it. Under the deed, the registrar would appoint a representative after hearing them and the other beneficiaries. Vaska could be heard but had no vote.

The procedure predated continuations. The registrar turned a page and asked the Radan on the left to speak.

He supported the release. He had asked for alterations to the apartment with the long window, and the plans had been changed.

The Radan on the right wanted the value kept in trust for the depot families and their successors, even if the houses were sold.

"For how many generations?" the registrar asked.

"The deed doesn't give a date. My father paid into it. So did I. I don't think I can give away the next person's share."

"Eight memberships have voted to end the trust."

"And four haven't. I want them rehoused. I don't want to sign away what comes after."

Mina set a cup down too hard. Coffee moved into the saucer. She took it away and brought a dry one.

The Radan on the left said, "You know why I want it."

"I know why you want the apartment."

"I want to own it. They showed me the lease and there's still somebody else to ask about the windows. I want the other paper, the one where it's ours. We had thirty-one years of that house. I wanted out before I died."

"So did I."

Neither raised his voice. Vaska went outside.

Mina followed with a coat she did not know whether Vaska needed. She put it round her anyway. They sat on the steps with their shoes on the lower tread.

"Shall I ask them to stop?" Mina said.

"For how long?"

"Until you're ready."

"I was ready last winter."

Across the yard somebody was taking the depot sign off the gate. The man had undone one end and could not reach the other, and an argument about fetching the longer ladder was becoming much more elaborate than fetching it.

"I packed the blue plates," Vaska said. "I haven't unpacked them. I thought if I did it would mean I was willing to stay."

"You can unpack a plate."

"I know."

"You don't have to tell either of them why."

"I know that too."

Mina tucked the edge of the coat under Vaska's elbow. The wind came across the yard from the water and found the gap between Mina's cuff and her hand.

"Last night he asked whether I'd eaten," Vaska said.

Mina waited.

"The one who said yes. We had a whole evening. Not one word about the trust. He asked what I'd eaten and said the plums would go with it, and I fetched the jar, and that was what we did. I hadn't thought about that for months. That it could be an evening."

She began to cry. Mina held the coat round her. In the hall the registrar was asking for the next submission.

"Can I tell them you want it finished?" Mina asked.

"I want everybody to stop asking me which of them he is."

Mina stayed with her until the man fetched the longer ladder.

There were written conditions on the consultation account. Vaska agreed that her immediate accommodation needs could be described. She did not agree to the record of the conversation being retained by the committee. Mina made sure the conditions went on the front sheet.

That afternoon, back at the hotel, Oren asked for the account. Mina's device was on the floury part of the table. She moved it, wiped the back, and sent the summary she had been asked to provide.

The family supports the proposed representation arrangement.

"Does she?" Oren asked.

"She wants to go."

"The apartment, you mean."

"Oren, she's packed. They're eating off two plates. She wants her husband back without the case every evening."

He was quiet. The guest from the lift came to the kitchen door to ask whether dinner was at seven or half past. Mina told him seven. He asked whether it could be quarter past. She said it would be ready at seven and remain edible.

When he had gone, Oren said, "The consultation sheet goes back to her."

"I've put that in."

"And this is only about who exercises the vote."

"Yes."

He added her summary to the recommendation. She could see his changes as he made them. The words *family support* appeared under the heading describing practical capacity to represent the interest.

The pan was hot. Mina put the first flatbread in and watched it while Oren asked her to confirm the attachment.

"Mina?"

She moved the pan off the heat. She read the attachment. The front sheet contained the restrictions she had insisted on. Vaska would not have to go on being received as evidence of her own marriage.

She confirmed it.

The first flatbread was almost black on one side. Mina turned it over and put the next one in.

The recommendation was accepted. The release passed. The lift was installed. The first guest who used it came out on the upper landing and called down to ask if it was the right floor, because it was the wrong smell.

Mina stood at the bottom and laughed up at him.

• • •

Now the adviser could remove the declaration from the sale packet. She could not remove the challenge Ren had raised. She asked for the old material.

Everything came before lunch except the consultation account, which had been returned to Vaska. Mina's summary was cited twice in Oren's recommendation.

The other Radan's objection was there. So was his later instruction against being reconstructed to continue the case. Mina asked the adviser whether that prevented a review.

"No. His written objection is enough. The instruction against reconstruction stands."

Mina read the summary again. She could remember Vaska's coat slipping off her shoulder. She could not remember the exact words of every sentence they had spoken. There was no new memory in the file that made her act a different act.

She went to lunch. Jessa had made the fish with the rye crumbs.

"You should have told me about Ren before the viewing," Mina said.

"I told you he hadn't signed."

"You said it was a matter of time."

"No. You said that. I said all right."

Mina put down her fork.

"You can look at the file if you want."

Jessa glanced toward the kitchen. "I've got six fish coming off."

"Later."

"Leave it there."

Mina moved her plate so Jessa would have room to put the others down.

After lunch Mina told Sanna. The answer came in nine minutes: I've already paid for the detailed drawings. You said all three owners wanted to sell.

Mina called her. Sanna let her explain, then asked whether she was supposed to tell the contractor to stop.

"For now," Mina said.

"I'll do it. You can tell him why."

6

Sanna agreed to come back. She said the drawings were hers and she would decide whether to use them. Mina offered to repay their cost. Sanna said they could settle that after finding out whether there was a transaction to settle it within.

The adviser helped Mina understand what might have to be retained from the price. When the figures were clear, Mina opened another question.

She asked the Child about retaining a right to the lounge on Tuesday evenings.

It described several arrangements, distinguished a licence from a retained interest, and asked whether she had the buyer's agreement. Mina said she was considering what to ask for.

It helped her draft a condition.

She read it to Oren after breakfast.

"Who is responsible for making it happen?" he asked.

"Sanna. Once she owns the building."

"She's taking the stove out."

"That isn't settled."

"I heard her say it."

Mina took her cup to the sink. The clock clicked. Oren had asked her to retain its sound when he no longer needed a clock he could see.

"I'll talk to her."

"She can say no."

"Yes."

"I would take less for the building."

"Then say how much less. Say what you're buying."

Mina turned off the tap. In the reception room somebody had rung the bell. She hoped it was a person who wanted something she could give them.

It was a man asking whether the white bench belonged in the sun or under the tree. He had been sent by two people who disagreed. Mina told him it had belonged under the tree for thirty years.

He said that was what one of the people had said, but the other person was cold.

She went out and helped him turn it halfway.

Sanna came back on Thursday. This time she brought her son, Tev, who went straight to the dining room and rolled a wooden ball across it.

The ball travelled well for half the room, changed its mind beside the fireplace, and disappeared beneath a dresser.

"That's not level," Tev said.

"It hasn't been level since the freight trains," Mina said.

"When was the last one?"

"Before you."

"That doesn't help me date it."

Sanna told him to fetch the ball. Mina took her into the kitchen and described Tuesdays.

She did not give the names of the people who came. Sanna did not ask for them. She asked how often the group met, what sort of access they required, and whether Mina proposed to be responsible for opening and closing.

"I'd hoped the building would continue to provide it."

"Would you be here?"

"At first. There's assistance with the room."

"I mean after that. Who would they come to?"

Mina held the draft flat on the table. It specified hours, access, and responsibility for leaving the room ready for its next use. Sanna had already read it.

"Keep it theirs," she said.

Sanna pushed the draft back a little. "I can't offer that. I don't know them."

"Only one evening."

"Every week."

"I would take less."

"I understand. But I don't want that arrangement. The entrance goes through the floor I want people skating on. The stove will be removed. We won't be making this room available in its present form."

"You've already decided about the stove?"

"Yes."

Mina released the edge of the draft. The smaller room at the dispensary would cost less than this condition. Mina knew its measurements. She still wanted Sanna to agree.

"You can use it until the work starts," Sanna said. "Give me a last date for Tuesdays. I need to send the contractor one set of dates."

"The adviser thinks the claims can stay with us, with part of the proceeds retained."

"I know. Mine is looking at it."

"Would that be enough?"

"Perhaps. You need to know something. I offered on another building before this one. It's still available."

Mina looked at the draft between them.

"The old assembly hall?"

"Yes."

"That floor is worse than ours."

"It's also a floor I can actually buy."

From reception came a crash, followed by Tev saying that nothing had broken.

Sanna shut her eyes.

"He's thirty," she said.

"It doesn't help," Mina said.

They went to see what had not broken.

7

That night Mina asked the Child to help her look at the alternatives.

It did. The town had more suitable rooms than Mina wanted to find. It could provide access, warmth, privacy within the requested scope, transport, food. It could make arrangements that would hold if Mina became unable to manage them. It distinguished those arrangements from guaranteeing that particular people would continue to attend.

Nothing in its answer was evasive. She asked questions until she ran out of questions she wanted answered.

Then she called Lea.

"Could you come tomorrow?"

There was a pause.

"To talk," Mina said.

"Yes."

"Not to do anything."

"All right."

She arrived in the morning with coffee from the place on the upper street that Mina claimed she didn't like. They sat on the white bench, now back under the tree.

"I've been making arrangements for Tuesdays," Mina said.

"Good."

"Not here."

Lea nodded. A man went past with a dog that was old enough to expect the bench to contain somebody it knew. Mina held out a hand. The dog inspected it, found nothing useful, and continued up the street.

"I didn't think you'd really go," Mina said.

"I know."

"I thought you'd change your mind."

"I know that too."

"Were you ever going to tell me what you thought of me for it?"

Lea looked down at her coffee.

"Are you asking whether I'm cross, or whether I'm staying?"

"Cross," Mina said.

"Some of the time."

They sat for a while.

Lea had picked a strip of paper from her coffee cup. She rolled it between her fingers.

"Tavi's putting up shelves. She keeps asking which books I'm bringing. I want to get there before she's done the lot."

"You could tell her to wait."

"I don't want her to wait. I want to help."

Mina looked at the hotel. In the top window a curtain had caught behind the latch. She could remember pulling it free last month. The window was seldom opened. It would have been Lea.

"What about the clinic?"

"I'll call you afterward. The transit'll take you."

"It won't wait while I find my coat."

"You can ask it to."

Mina bent to put her cup beside the bench. Lea reached for it before it tipped. They had both finished. Mina left the cups where they were for a moment, close together under the seat.

"I can come for the transfer," Lea said. "If you sell. I can stay until the Sunday after. Then I need to go."

Mina nodded.

"Did you tell Ren about Tavi before you told me?"

"I told Dad the day I told you."

"Ren, you mean."

Lea turned the cup in her hands.

"That's what you do. Every time."

"I haven't asked you to stop calling him Dad."

"No. You just correct it."

On the way back Lea went to the upper street for more coffee. Mina walked down to the hotel alone.

Ren had sent a version of the word game. Mina opened it in reception instead of the kitchen.

There were four players. Each had to persuade the others that a made-up word named something they already knew. The spelling could be challenged. The thing itself could not. Mina lost in the first round by arguing that there was no such thing as the particular moment somebody knew they were going to be late but kept walking at the same speed.

"You did it on our honeymoon," Ren said.

The other two players laughed. Mina did not know them. One had a voice low enough that she kept raising the volume, and the other said very little until she produced a word so obscene Mina objected to it.

"On what ground?" Ren asked.

"It's horrible."

"An excellent ground. Not in the rules, but an excellent ground."

They changed the rules. Mina stayed for another round. When she left she had one point, which she thought she had been given, and a word she was trying not to remember.

Oren was available in the kitchen. He asked if she was eating.

"In a minute."

"Eat now. It's half past two."

"I've been with Ren."

"You'd still have been with him holding a plate."

She cut bread and took the jar of plums out. Oren told her the old guest from the upper street had asked if the final lunch could begin later. Mina said no. Oren said that was what he had told him, but it had sounded less final in his voice.

"Are you looking forward to leaving?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You could hesitate."

"I have. For years."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know. Talk to people without hearing the lunch bell. Finish a book while somebody else wonders whether the fish has arrived."

She ate. He waited until she had finished the piece of bread.

"Will you sign the correction?" she asked.

"I'll correct the claim about the family. I'm not signing that we stole his vote."

"Ren says—"

"I heard Ren."

"He says your recommendation—"

"Our recommendation. You sent it too."

Mina put the lid back on the plums.

"I can never ask you anything without getting both of you."

"You've only asked one of us. Let me answer."

She left her hand on the jar.

"All right."

"Can this stay here? Between us. Before it turns into everybody's statement."

"Yes."

He asked for the sound of the extraction fan to be lowered. Mina turned it down. Then he said, “I remember taking his bed down that stair. Before I died. We had to saw the footboard off. He swore he’d leave the house before buying another. Radan wanted to move then. We both knew it.”

“They were both him afterward.”

“I know. I didn’t say he was more him. I said I knew what it cost to sit in that house while they couldn’t settle it. I wanted Vaska out. I wanted the other people out. You’d been carrying cases up two flights and saying it didn’t hurt. I wanted the lift in. I can’t put that into the submission as though it happened to somebody else.”

Mina looked up at the clock. Oren had asked for it to be put there because the place it had been before caught the steam.

“The note I sent you wasn’t enough,” she said.

“No. I used your note. I shouldn’t have put her down as agreeing.”

“But I gave it to you.”

“And I used it. There’s room for both of us on that line.”

She laughed once. He did not join her.

“I don’t want you to turn that into me agreeing with Ren,” he said.

“I won’t.”

“I mean it, Mina.”

“I said I won’t.”

They went through the rest of the lunch without speaking about the file. Oren asked if she had paid the contractor. She had not. He asked her to do it before she forgot. She did it while he was still present, then asked if he wanted her to stay.

“I’d like that.”

She stayed for ten minutes, listening to somebody he had heard interviewed and did not agree with. At three he ended the channel to finish the book.

Ren wrote that afternoon. He wanted to know whether Oren would correct the family-support statement. They needed a position before the adviser could settle the draft.

Mina typed: He says he shouldn't have put Vaska down as agreeing.

She read it. It was true. It was also a precise answer to a question Ren had asked. She thought of adding that Oren had wanted it kept between them, but that would make the message something she could not send.

She sent it without the addition.

The extraction fan had come back on. She reached to turn it down, as Oren had asked, then left her hand on the control. There was nobody trying to speak.

On the table a ring of water marked where her glass had been. She wiped it away with her sleeve. The message was still open. She could call Ren and say what she had left out. Instead she turned the device face down and went to check the bread.

8

Vaska said she would speak to her with Radan present. Not on Tuesday, and not in the hotel.

Mina went to their apartment on the upper street. The lift worked, the room was warm, and the window admitted a broad strip of afternoon light. Their new apartment was no longer new. Vaska had worn the arm of a chair shiny and grown a plant across a frame until it had become part of the window's design.

Radan greeted Mina through the household installation. She had not spoken to him for several months. She had used to speak to him whenever she visited, then begun to let the visits be about Vaska. She could not find the occasion on which that changed from consideration into habit.

"You're selling," he said.

"I hope to."

"Vaska told me. The skating woman. I said I wished I had knees to object with."

Mina laughed, grateful, and watched Vaska hear the gratitude.

"I'll make tea," Vaska said.

There was cake on the table, still in its paper. Vaska cut three slices and put one back. She gave Mina the smaller of the two that remained.

Mina showed her the proposed correction. Vaska read it, put a finger beside the reference to the consultation, and asked whether the old account would be needed.

"It would help them establish what I was allowed to say," Mina said. "It can be received under a limited scope."

"No."

"Not published. Received under—"

"No."

Mina stopped. Vaska sat with her cup held away from the saucer.

"You can correct your own summary," she said. "It wasn't what I told you."

"I know that now."

"You knew it was a summary then."

"Yes."

Radan said, "I don't mind you saying I wanted to stop."

"That isn't in question."

"It sounds as though it is. The agreeable one. The one they could do business with. Vaska said you were careful not to write that."

"That isn't what I think you were."

"Then don't make it the only thing anybody finds out about me."

Mina put her cup down. There was cake left on her plate. She cut a piece and could not make herself eat it.

"You have read the submission?" she asked.

"Several times. I thought it was a reasonable account. I still do, except the part about Vaska. She was tired. She wanted me to come to dinner without bringing the file. I wanted that too. He wanted to keep the houses because the trust had said they were ours and he didn't believe they should get out of it merely because the alternatives were better."

"He had a point," Vaska said.

"He did. He also had every evening. We were in the same family and the same dispute, and neither of us could be the only Radan in it. I don't regret saying yes. You can put that in your correction."

"I'll ask for you to be invited to respond in your own words."

"Good."

Vaska looked at Mina.

"You were glad I was better," she said. "I was glad too. But I didn't—"

She put the cup down. It caught the edge of the saucer.

"I didn't say yes to that. I didn't even know the words. Representation arrangement. You put that in afterward."

"The old account would show what you did agree to."

"It would show what I said about them. Both of them."

"It needn't be published."

"You'd have it. The people reading your correction would have it. Then who? I put it away, Mina. I've lived here seventeen years. I don't want to hand it round again."

Mina asked about an account that stated only what Vaska did and did not authorise.

"I'll get my own advice," Vaska said. "Then I'll tell you."

Mina opened her bag to put the draft away. She had brought a second copy and left it in the bag.

On the way out Radan asked her to stay a moment. Vaska went to get the coat Mina had put in the wrong room.

"Is Ren well?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm glad. Tell him I'd like to speak. Not through the review."

"I will."

"And Mina. He'd have hated being brought back for this. Don't let them."

"I've checked. They won't."

"Good."

Vaska came back with the coat. It had caught on something and there was a thread hanging from the cuff. She found scissors and cut the thread. Mina stood while she did it. Vaska held out the clipped thread for her to put in the bin.

Outside, she sent Radan's message to Ren.

He replied: I'd like that. Thank you. And Oren's phrase is helpful. Can I cite it as his position?

Mina stopped on the corner. A delivery unit slowed to let her cross, and she waved it on although she was not ready to go anywhere.

No, she wrote. I shouldn't have sent it.

Did he say it?

Yes. It was private.

The answer took longer.

Why didn't you tell me? I've already put it in a draft. I'll take it out.

She put the phone away, then took it out to tell him she would speak to Oren herself.

9

The room above the dispensary was smaller than Mina remembered. Vaska and Neri had said the chairs were better. They were. A service corridor crossed its private entrance, which meant that the evenings could be kept private but arriving could not be made invisible. The access manager showed Mina where the boundary lay and asked whether she wanted to try the controls.

She tried them. They did what he had said they did.

In the street afterward she called Oren.

"Can we talk?"

"Now?"

"If you can."

"I've half an hour."

Mina went into the hotel and closed the kitchen door. She told him what she had sent. She gave him the sentence, exactly, then told him Ren had asked to cite it and she had said no.

Oren did not speak.

"He won't use it."

The fan was off. She could hear water somewhere in the pipe above the sink.

"Did you send it while I was still here?" he asked.

"No. Later."

"I see."

"You were going to make a statement. I thought—"

"We had agreed."

"Yes."

"Not something you thought I'd prefer. We said it."

"Yes."

Mina could hear the fan starting up beyond the closed door. She had left the bread out. In the morning the cut end would be hard.

"I wanted him to stop thinking you wouldn't admit anything."

Oren said nothing.

She gripped the edge of the table. There was a place on the underside where a screw had been put through too far, and the point pressed into her finger.

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing with it. Not now."

She wanted to tell him about Vaska's thread, and the copy she had left in her bag, and the message she had not sent. He had been the person she told when she was trying to work out whether she had done a thing well. She moved her hand off the screw.

"All right."

"I'll send my correction through the adviser."

"We could do them together."

"No."

He ended the channel before the half hour had passed.

• • •

Mina spent two days on her statement. The first version said she had acted in good faith. The adviser asked what fact that established. Mina took it out. The second version described Vaska's exhaustion. She deleted that too.

What remained withdrew her authority for the sentence asserting family support. It identified the decision in which that sentence had been used. It did not reproduce the conversation or substitute a different account of Vaska's marriage. People with the old record would know which family it concerned.

Mina sent the wording to Vaska and waited.

While she waited she paid the contractor for the wasted visit. He came to measure the entrance for his equipment and found her in the hall, where she had put the packet down on the old reception desk.

"Is she buying it, then?"

"We haven't settled it."

"Right. I'll leave the measure, shall I?"

"Would you?"

"No use taking it twice."

He worked through the building. Mina followed him as far as the dining room, then stopped following. He knew what he was measuring.

Vaska answered through an adviser. She disputed the original inference, declined to supply the consultation account, and did not oppose Mina correcting her own statement. A personal message came underneath: I haven't agreed that this puts it right. Please don't tell anyone I have.

Mina sent the authorised response to the adviser. She kept the personal message out of it. Oren had been the person she would have told that to.

Ren called the next afternoon.

"I've changed my draft," he said. "Nothing you sent from Oren is in it."

"Thank you."

"It wouldn't prove what I wanted it to. Even if I could use it."

"I said I was sorry."

"You haven't, to me."

She shut her eyes.

"I'm sorry I sent it to you."

"All right."

"I'll correct my statement. I won't get Vaska's account. I'm not asking her again."

"Understood."

"And you'll sign the sale if the old claim stays with us. You don't get to hold the building until the review says what you want."

Ren was quiet.

"I thought the building was the one thing that would make you listen," he said.

"It was. That doesn't make it yours to keep using."

"I own part of it."

"So do we. You want us to answer for something we helped do. Fine. Let Sanna have a floor."

"Send me the terms," Ren said.

"You'll read them?"

"I'm going to read them. That's why I'm asking."

• • •

The next week Sanna brought the new price herself. It allowed for the delay and the additional work. She laid it on the table and waited while Mina read it.

"The old claim stays with you," Sanna said. "My adviser says that can be done. Your retained fund is your business. I won't buy a promise to join the review."

"No."

"And if this isn't completed by the date we've agreed, I'll take the assembly hall."

Mina looked up. "It has no upper rooms."

"I'll live elsewhere."

"I thought you wanted people to stay."

"I do. I also want to open."

Tev was in reception making a rubbing of the old lettering on the glass. Mina went out to ask him to be careful and found he had put a sheet underneath to catch the dust. On the paper the letters came out backward. He was copying them anyway.

She went back and accepted the price.

The agreement set aside a substantial part of each owner's proceeds for the review and any remedy. They could still owe more. Each took advice before signing.

Mina read her correction once more. Vaska's private words were absent. She checked who would receive it, then filed it.

When the adviser asked whether to begin assembling the next packet, Mina said yes.

• • •

She paid for two years at the dispensary and for review before the term ended. She offered to host the first six evenings. Bera offered the next six. Nobody would commit to the seventh month yet.

"I'll do the lunch," Jessa said. "I'm leaving at four."

Mina was reading the removal list.

"Four, Mina. Put that on there."

Mina wrote it down. Jessa tried to open a jar. Mina held the glass while she turned the lid.

"Do you want to come to the coast when it's over?" Jessa said. "Two days."

"Yes."

"Check the dates."

One fell on the first Tuesday Mina had offered to host.

"The week after?"

"Good."

Mina put it in her calendar. Then she looked at the afternoon and saw she had left the old household channel marked as available.

It was still available. Oren had not closed it. She could say his name and, if he was not elsewhere, he would answer.

She called him to ask whether he wanted to talk.

10

He asked to be present for the last lunch. He had friends who would come, and there were people he had not said goodbye to.

"Of course," Mina said.

"After that I'm ending the household channel."

She was standing at the sink. She dried her hands because they were wet and because she could not think what else to do with them.

"At the hotel."

"At the hotel and at home."

"What does that mean for us?"

"You can call me. I'll call you. I want to decide when a conversation begins."

"You've always been able to go elsewhere."

"I know. I want you to ask me to arrive."

Mina folded the cloth along its old crease.

"Because of what I sent."

"Yes. I keep wondering who'll get the next thing I say."

Mina folded the cloth again. It was too thick now to lie flat.

She waited. He did not give her the next line.

"Will you still want to talk?"

"I do now. I'm trying to tell you how."

"For how long?"

"I can't tell you that."

She laid the cloth on the draining board. Through the window she could see the grass where the freight line had been. A woman and a boy were walking down it. The boy had found a way to travel along the narrow edge of the old concrete without touching the grass and was making his mother wait.

"You can leave the clock sound on," Oren said. "It isn't me."

Mina began to say she knew. She pressed the cloth flat with the heel of her hand.

They arranged the lunch. He asked her to make sure the installation would not be packed until he had finished. She wrote that on the removal list.

• • •

At the final Tuesday, Bera brought a cake shaped like the hotel.

It had too many windows. They counted them twice, and Neri said it represented the building's potential.

The sign above the iced door said NORTH RUMS.

"That's not what I asked for," Bera said.

"Did you check it?"

"I was checking the windows."

They cut through reception first. Mina took a slice containing the wall Sanna wanted removed and did not announce this to anybody. It tasted of lemon.

Vaska came at nine. She had told Mina she would come for the final evening and that this should not be taken as a response to the review. Mina had wanted to tell her she did not have to keep saying that. She had not said it.

Radan had declined to attend. He and Ren had arranged to speak separately. Mina knew this because Ren asked whether he could use the old installation in reception for the conversation, with no presence admitted beyond the participants. She said yes, then went to

arrange the room so that she would not have to walk through it. Mina went to get another plate and found Vaska had brought her own, wrapped in a cloth.

"I wasn't sure how many you'd put out."

"I put out enough."

Vaska sat beside Neri. She ate a room from the second floor and said the new place would be too hot if they left its controls as they were.

"We'll change them," Bera said.

They talked about the new place. They talked about a woman who had moved away and begun sending photographs of vegetables as though she had invented growing them. Neri cut nobody's hair. She said she had brought the scissors and couldn't be bothered.

Near eleven, Mina reached for the device in her pocket, then left it there. The evenings had never been recorded. Someone was telling a story about a man she thought had been given the wrong name.

She corrected it.

"It doesn't matter," said Bera.

"It was his brother."

"Then it matters to the brother."

"He was the one I liked."

"That was your mistake."

Later, when they had gone, Mina took the scissors out of the drawer and put them in a box for the dispensary. Neri had forgotten them. Mina wrote her name on a piece of tape so nobody would treat them as belonging to the room.

She turned off the stove. It made a soft settling sound. The stove would have to cool before it could be moved. She wrote that on the removal list too, below Oren's installation, then went to close the back window.

On the Saturday, the lunch filled the dining room.

Lea took the upper tables. A few people had mistaken the lunch for an opening and asked Sanna about hiring skates. Oren talked for most of the afternoon with a man he had not seen for forty years. Mina heard him say, “No, I haven’t changed my mind,” and carried the plates through without finding out what they were discussing.

At four, Jessa removed her apron and hung it on its hook.

At five Oren called Mina from the dining room.

“I’m finished,” he said.

“Sanna’s coming at six.”

“I spoke to her this morning.”

Mina stood by the table. The man who had stayed longest had gone to find his coat.

“There’s nothing else I need to do?” she asked.

“Not for me.”

“All right.”

“Goodnight, Mina.”

“Goodnight.”

The channel ended. The installation’s ordinary status remained: available for another authorised use. Mina marked it ready for removal and went into the kitchen.

The washing up remained. There was no difficulty about having it done. Mina asked for the assistance she ordinarily used after lunch, and it was done well. She sat beside Jessa while it happened. They drank the wine somebody had brought, which was sweeter than either liked.

“I booked the coast,” Jessa said.

“Good,” Mina said.

“Twin beds. I assumed you’d want that.”

“For once,” Mina said, “you may assume.”

Jessa laughed and poured the rest of the wine.

At six, Sanna arrived with Tev and a flat package.

“The new sign?” Mina asked.

"It can wait."

"Show me."

It said RAUK ROLLERS in green letters with a red line running through them. Mina thought it was a terrible name. She could not imagine becoming accustomed to it.

"Tev designed it," Sanna said.

Mina inspected the spacing.

"Will it light up?"

"Only if we want it to," Tev said.

"The upper rooms will get the light."

"We'll test it from the rooms."

She nodded. This was something she knew how to ask about.

The papers were completed on Monday morning. Oren confirmed his agreement, then Mina hers. Ren gave his consent through a separate channel.

After the retentions, costs, and reduction, Mina's available share was less than half the figure she had first shown Lea. The arrangements for her home and ordinary care were secure. A note about helping Lea acquire the flat on the upper street was still in her working figures. She deleted it. Lea was moving somewhere else.

The old settlement still stood. Ren told Mina he found this hard to accept. Mina said he could find it hard, provided he did not ask Sanna to carry it.

Afterward she stood in reception, unsure where to put her hands. Sanna asked if she wanted to see the first drawings of the floor.

"Not today," Mina said.

"You can leave without looking," Sanna said.

"I know."

Sanna looked at her for a moment, then opened the drawings for the contractor who had come in behind her. Mina watched them discuss the beam. The contractor asked where the floor would begin. Sanna said at the door. The question had an answer that did not require Mina.

On the way out she took the old brass bell. She had agreed with Sanna that she could have it. It was heavier than it looked. She carried it home wrapped in a tea towel and left it on the kitchen counter because there was nowhere else ready.

At home Mina said Oren's name before she remembered.

The room offered to place a call. She said no.

She took the potatoes she had bought out of the bag, then put them back. She had bought enough for lunch at the hotel. A meal could be provided whenever she wanted one; it would have been good. She stood by the counter unable to decide whether she was hungry.

At four she found the recording Oren had made before his death, when the plumber wanted to know which pipe was knocking.

For eleven seconds there was only the sound of the pipe. Then Oren said, close to the device, "There. It does it when you stop listening."

Mina could be heard in the background asking whether he had taken the towels upstairs.

"In a minute."

"You said that this morning."

"And I haven't changed my mind."

She listened to it twice. Then she put the potatoes in a bowl and asked for supper.

11

She hosted the first Tuesday at the dispensary. Six people came. Two sent word that they would not. One had simply not arrived.

Neri pulled a chair to the window and said she was taking that one next week. They changed the temperature. The scissors were still in a box at Mina's house; Neri said she had another pair somewhere in her bag and they spent ten minutes looking. She found a pear and offered it round.

Afterward Mina cleared the crumbs and checked the service door. It took twenty minutes to leave the room ready for the next booking. Five more evenings were hers. She checked the calendar for Bera's six rather than asking whether she was still sure.

On the walk home she called Ren.

"Would you come tomorrow morning?"

"I can't. We're playing."

"Later?"

"How late?"

She stopped outside the closed bakery. There was flour on the inside ledge of the window.

"I don't know. I just thought you might come."

"Are you asking me because Oren won't be there?"

Mina looked at the names on the screen. She had selected his contact. She had known which one would answer.

"I'm lonely," she said.

He did not answer for a moment.

"I'm sorry. I'd like to see you. Friday? I can't do tomorrow. Not properly."

They arranged Friday. He said he would not be there all morning. She said she had not offered breakfast.

At home she took the scissors out of the wrong box and asked Neri what she wanted done with them.

• • •

On Sunday Lea sent a photograph of the shelves. The canvas bag was on the floor, empty. Mina enlarged the picture until she could read some of the titles, then put it back to its proper size and wrote to ask whether the journey had been all right.

The wall came down while Mina was away with Jessa. Sanna sent the message she had asked for. Mina read it over breakfast and put the phone beside her plate. Jessa was eating a second piece of toast. She asked Mina to pass the butter.

• • •

Mina missed the first skating night. On the second she went with Bera, who said she would show her how it worked.

"You put the skates on," Bera explained, "and then regret it."

The square was wet. The red line of the new sign shone in the windows. A shield kept its light out of the upper rooms. Somebody had hung planters from the fish hooks under the kitchen window; pale flowers bent over the brick.

Inside, the wall was gone.

People travelled from the dining room into the lounge without using a door. The old reception desk had been taken away. The floor continued through the place it had occupied.

Sanna was sorting skates at a low counter. She greeted Mina and asked her size.

There were twenty-three people present. Mina counted before she could stop herself. Four she did not know. An older man held the rail with both hands while a younger woman told him he could let go of one. He seemed to be considering whether he knew her well enough to believe her.

Tev brought Mina a pair of skates and showed her how to do them up. Bera went away holding the rail. Mina stayed where she was until Sanna asked if she wanted help.

She did. Sanna showed her where to put her weight. Mina went farther along the rail, trying to reach the other end without sitting down unexpectedly. Then Bera tried to turn, caught her arm, and brought both of them to a stop.

Tev hurried over. Nobody was hurt. Bera began laughing before Mina had decided whether to. Mina laughed too and let Tev help her stand properly.

Later she sat near the window with her shoes on. The wall would have passed through the table. She could place it exactly, then could not.

Radan's response to the review had arrived that afternoon. He had sent it himself. He approved the correction about Vaska. He did not approve the account in which his agreeing had made him the convenient Radan. He had described choosing the apartment, asking for the window to be lowered, imagining Vaska sitting beside it. Mina had read the measurements and recognised the room she had visited. She wanted Oren to read it. He had said he would in his own time.

Vaska was outside.

Mina went to the door. Vaska looked past her into the room.

"It's very different."

"Yes."

"They've done it quickly."

They stood with the door half open. Someone wanted the music louder. Someone else objected. Tev went to find out which speakers they meant.

"Would you like to come in?" Mina asked.

"Not tonight. I'm on my way up."

Vaska brought an envelope out of her bag.

"Neri asked me to sharpen these. She says you'll bring them Tuesday."

Mina took it. Cloth protected the points.

"I've got a date for the next stage," she said.

"So have we."

"I didn't know they'd sent—"

"We asked."

Vaska looked into the room again.

"I liked the stove."

"So did I."

"They've found another reference to that account. In the correspondence. I'm going to read it."

"Can you send—"

"I'll ask what can be sent."

Mina moved the envelope from one hand to the other.

"I'll bring them Tuesday," she said.

Vaska nodded and went up the street. Mina remained in the doorway until Sanna called to say people needed to get through.

She returned the skates. Tev took them and asked if she would be back next week.

"Perhaps."

"Your size is on the side. You'll know which ones next time."

He began wiping the wheels. Mina thanked him and went home.

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She put the scissors by the door. The brass bell occupied the place on the counter where she wanted to put the shopping. She moved it to the shelf. It rang once as she set it down.

Oren called at seven, the time they had arranged.

"Can you talk?"

Mina was still holding the bag. She put it down.

"Yes."

He had been reading. He wanted to tell her about something in the book that was wrong.

Mina pulled out a chair.