

HASH &  DAGGER

— STORY ONE: —

THE LEFT-HANDED TORCH



A NOVELLA FROM
HASH & DAGGER

The Left-Handed Torch

A Hash & Dagger Story

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I. The Building That Took Him In

Tobin had known the Crown Road Waystation would be large, but knowing it from a hiring letter and standing beneath it with dust on his tongue were two entirely different troubles. The building rose from the King's High Road like a thing too important to be called an inn and too busy to be called a castle. Its stone face climbed floor after floor above him, all tall windows, carved arches, red banners, and iron rails catching the morning sun. The front doors alone looked wide enough to swallow the wagon that had brought him, horses and all, and for one foolish moment Tobin wondered if that was how the place worked. Perhaps people did not enter the Crown Road Waystation so much as get taken in by it. The thought was ridiculous. Then again, so was accepting work at the largest royal waystation in the kingdom and pretending his stomach had not been tying itself into sailor's knots since sunrise.

The yard in front of it moved like a living thing. Guards shouted from the gate and the steps, their orders cutting through the deeper rumble of wagon wheels and the hard clack of hooves on stone. From the stable yard came the sharp neigh of horses, the scrape of tack, the creak of wagon beds, and the irritated voices of stable hands trying to make beasts and men obey the same schedule. Merchants lingered near the approach, catching travelers before they reached the doors, offering gloves, ink, sweet rolls, cheap charms, road maps, better road maps, and one suspiciously confident man's "guaranteed noble-grade boot polish." Guests came and went in steady streams, some fresh from the road and sagging with travel, others stepping out clean and rested like the building had washed the world off them. Staff moved among them in neat coats, guiding, carrying, pointing, apologizing, bowing, and vanishing. Over it all hung the smell of dust, horse dung, damp straw, leather, sweat, and somewhere beneath it, warm bread drifting from inside like the building wanted to prove it could be kind.

Tobin sat frozen on the wagon bench and stared.

This was fine.

It was not fine.

It was work. He needed work. Better than that, it was steady work. Work with a bed attached, if the hiring letter could be trusted, and Tobin had decided on the ride over that he trusted hiring letters at least until they proved themselves liars. A man could build something from steady work. He could keep his head down, learn the rhythm of the place, do

what was asked, and become useful before anyone had reason to wonder if some clerk had been too generous with the ink.

Unless they wondered immediately.

That was the trouble with new places. Back home, Tobin knew what people meant when they looked at him. He knew which silences were harmless, which ones were warnings, and which ones meant someone wanted him to carry something heavy. Here, every glance felt untranslated. Every uniform had a rank he had not learned. Every doorway seemed to lead somewhere a person could be welcomed, corrected, or quietly redirected by someone who had been waiting all morning for a new assistant to redirect. He could already see himself stepping inside, handing over the letter, and being met with the sort of polite smile people used when they were about to ruin your week without raising their voice.

And you haven't even gone inside yet!

No. Stop standing here like luggage.

He should move.

Any moment now.

The trouble was that moving made the whole thing real. Sitting on the wagon, he was still almost a traveler. Almost passing through. Almost someone who could point at the building and say, wouldn't that be a terrible place to get lost? The moment his boots touched the ground, he became what the letter claimed he was: Tobin, Assistant to the Waystation Attendants. A title long enough to sound important and low enough to guarantee he would be blamed by people with shorter titles.

The wagon driver's voice cracked through the noise.

"Aye, lad, are ye gonna get yer stuff, or does ye expect me to take it in fur yah with dat little lettarr you have der?"

Tobin blinked, dragged suddenly back into his own body, and realized he had been sitting there like a sack of turnips with nerves.

"Right. Sorry."

He grabbed his satchel and bundle from the wagon bed too quickly, nearly pulled the bundle open, clutched it shut against his chest, then tried to make the whole movement look intentional.

It did not.

Luckily, the wagon driver gave him the merciful gift of not caring.

Tobin stepped down into the dust. Behind him, the wagon driver clicked his tongue, the horses shifted, and the road prepared to move on without him. Ahead, the front doors waited beneath the carved crest of the Crown Road Waystation.

Go in.

Not yet.

Go in.

You still have time to become a turnip seller.

He drew one breath, then another, each one tasting dust and horse dung and warm bread and nerves. The anxiety did not leave. It settled in, made itself comfortable, and waited to see what he would do with it.

Tobin tightened his grip on everything he owned, crossed the yard, climbed the front steps, and pushed open the doors to the first day of the rest of his life.

II. Nice With Teeth

The first thing Tobin noticed was space, and then immediately after, the complete lack of it. The front doors opened into a hall broad enough to make a man lower his voice without knowing why, its polished floor stretching beneath high beams, hanging lanterns, and banners that swayed gently in the air stirred by hundreds of bodies passing through. Sunlight spilled in behind him and caught on brass fittings, carved railings, waxed wood, and the clean stone walls, making the whole room seem too grand for muddy boots and travel-stained cloaks, yet there they were everywhere. Guests clustered near the front desk with letters, bags, complaints, children, and the exhausted expressions of people who had spent too many hours pretending a wagon bench was a seat. Beyond the desk, Tobin caught glimpses of sitting rooms, office doors, staff moving through side passages, guards posted where the public space began to narrow into places the public was clearly not meant to follow, and deeper inside, hallways that seemed to branch away into the hidden workings of the building like veins beneath skin. Voices rose and folded over one another until they became a single indoor weather: travelers checking rooms, merchants pressing business, porters asking who owned which trunk, staff answering with practiced patience, and somewhere farther off, the muffled rhythm of work that did not pause just because Tobin had arrived. He stood just inside the doors with his satchel in one hand and his hiring letter in the other, feeling the waystation close around him not like a trap exactly, but like a machine deciding where to place its newest, smallest gear.

The Front Desk had more people behind it than Tobin had expected, which was foolish, because everything in the Crown Road Waystation had more people than he expected. To the left, beneath the polished sign for Front Desk Reception, three receptionists worked the long counter, each speaking to a different traveler with the calm desperation of a person paid to make chaos form a line. Across the hall to the right, the Guest Support Station handled its own swarm of problems.

A fourth figure, younger than the others and standing a little too straight in a jacket that looked freshly issued, noticed Tobin before he reached the counter. “I am Nessa Wren Assistant Receptionist”, she says, as she stepped out from the side of the desk and planted herself in his path with the confidence of someone who had recently been given a small amount of authority and intended to spend all of it before lunch.

“You there,” she said, looking him up and down. “This entrance is for guests, royal messengers, approved merchants, and staff with cause. You do not look like a guest, royal messenger, approved merchant, or staff with cause.”

Tobin stopped with one hand still wrapped around his hiring letter.

There it was. Immediate wondering. Right on schedule.

Nessa lifted her chin. “Produce proof, then. Else I call the guard and let him decide what to do with a road-dusted boy loitering at the Crown’s front desk.”

Tobin held the letter out, but did not let go of it.

“My proof is here, my boots are muddy because the road has not yet learned manners, and if I looked like I belonged, I suspect I would already know better than to stand in your way. But I was told to report to this desk, so unless the Crown has taken to hiring boys for sport, I am precisely where I am meant to be.”

Her eyes narrowed.

Tobin felt his own mouth catch up with his nerves about half a breath too late.

Careful.

No, not careful. Careful people got stepped around, and he had not spent half a day in a wagon just to be turned away by someone his own age with polished buttons and a borrowed frown.

Tobin stared back, heart beating hard enough to make the letter tremble between them.

A voice spoke from just beyond Nessa’s shoulder.

“Is this the new boy for the Assistant to the Waystation Attendants position?”

Tobin looked up and saw a tall woman in bright orange attire extending her hand toward him as if she had already decided they were introduced. She wore a sharply cut suit in a shade bold enough to challenge the banners overhead, with clean lines, fitted sleeves, and polished buttons that caught the light when she moved. Her platinum-blond hair was pinned back with perfect care—not severe exactly, but close enough that every loose strand looked like it had made a formal request before escaping.

“Welcome to the Royal Waystation of the King’s High Road,” she said.

“My name is Serelle Vane, and I am the Director of Guest Experience. Very glad you showed up. We have a great deal of work that needs getting done before the big event next week.”

Tobin took her hand because it was already there.

“Thank you, ma’am. I’m—”

“Tobin,” she said.

While she shook his right hand, her other hand reached across with such smooth certainty that as she took the folded hiring letter from his left hand before he even realized he had let it go. She did not ask for it. She did not look down at it. One moment Tobin possessed proof that he belonged here, and the next it had been claimed by a woman who apparently collected authority the way other people collected buttons. She turned and began walking.

“You are assigned as Assistant to the Waystation Attendants, which means you will answer where needed, move when told, listen the first time, ask questions before mistakes become expensive, and learn quickly which areas are guest-facing, which are staff-only, and which you should not enter unless you enjoy being remembered for unfortunate reasons.”

Tobin stood there for half a breath too long, watching her stride away as if the crowd knew to part before she reached it.

His first opinion was that she was old.

Not old-old. Not bent-backed, story-by-the-fire old. But adult in the full and dangerous way people became when they had survived enough years to stop explaining themselves. Thirty-something, maybe. Near forty. Ancient, practically, from where Tobin stood at sixteen with dust on his boots and a satchel strap biting into his shoulder.

His second opinion was that she seemed nice.

Technically.

She smiled when she spoke. Her voice was warm enough for guests and sharp enough for staff. She had welcomed him, hadn’t she? That counted for something. Probably.

His third opinion arrived slower and sat heavier.

She seemed like the sort of nice that had teeth behind it.

Serelle stopped mid-stride and looked back over her shoulder.

“Well, Tobin?” she asked. “Are you going to follow and listen, or are you already quitting?”

Tobin tightened his grip on his satchel.

Then he followed.

III. Following Is a Useful Beginning

Tobin followed so quickly that his first three steps were less walking and more catching up with the decision his body had made without him.

Need to stop spacing out.

"I'm following," he said, half to Serelle and half to himself.

"Good," she said without slowing. "Following is a useful beginning. Listening is better. Doing both at once is rare enough that I praise it when I see it."

Tobin was not sure if that was encouragement or an insult, so he accepted it as both and hurried after her.

Serelle cut through the Front Entry Hall like she owned not only the floor beneath her boots but the air above it. People moved for her before they seemed to realize they were doing it. A porter shifted a trunk out of her path. A merchant stopped mid-sentence, hat in hand, then remembered who he had been trying to overcharge. One of the receptionists at the Front Desk glanced up, received the smallest possible nod from Serelle, and returned at once to explaining to an elderly traveler that no, the Royal Waystation could not guarantee a room "far from all human noise" unless the guest preferred sleeping in the stable loft. Tobin tried to take it all in and failed immediately.

The Front Entry Hall opened into the Main Waiting Hall, and the room seemed to stretch wider the farther they entered, as if the building enjoyed proving him wrong every time he thought he understood its size. Benches lined the walls in orderly rows, though no one seated on them looked orderly. Travelers slumped over their bags. Children crawled under seats while tired parents pretended not to notice. A pair of merchants leaned close over a small table, whispering as if secrets became cheaper in public spaces. Guards stood near the main approaches, their armor polished enough to impress guests but scuffed enough to warn fools. The hall carried the polished beauty of royal money and the restless pressure of too many people needing too many things at once.

"Public areas first," Serelle said. "Guests see stone, banners, warmth, order, and smiling faces. They do not see panic, shortage, breakage, staff arguments, missing linens, kitchen delays, lost children, misplaced keys, or anything that smells worse than stew."

She glanced back at him.

"When in doubt, you also do not see those things. You find someone who can fix them."

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And if you caused them?”

“Find someone who can fix them faster?”

For the first time, Serelle’s smile changed. Not much. Just enough.

“Good. You may survive.”

They passed a wide opening where Tobin caught sight of a sitting area with upholstered chairs, polished side tables, and guests pretending they were not listening to one another. Beyond another turn, the atmosphere shifted. The public noise softened behind office doors and wooden partitions. Serelle led him toward a more official corner of the ground floor, where the walls held framed notices, wax-sealed announcements, duty schedules, and maps of places Tobin suspected he would be expected to memorize by tomorrow.

“This way,” she said. “Quick introduction.”

“To who?”

“Whom,” she said.

Tobin blinked.

“To whom?”

“To someone who cares less about grammar than I do, but more about coin than everyone else combined.”

That seemed answer enough.

She stopped at an office door, knocked once, and entered before anyone inside could do anything as inefficient as invite her.

The sign on the door read “Silas Wyrnn, Director of Coin.” Inside sat a sixty-something man with graying white hair, a neat beard, and the expression of someone who had spent his life watching numbers misbehave. Shelves lined the walls, packed with ledgers and locked boxes. A scale sat on one table. A small iron-banded chest sat on another. Papers covered the desk in tidy stacks, which somehow made them more intimidating than mess would have.

The man looked up.

“Serelle,” he said.

“Silas,” she replied. “This is Tobin. New Assistant to the Waystation Attendants.”

Silas’s eyes moved to Tobin, then to his boots, then to the satchel, then back to Tobin’s face. It was not an unkind look. It was worse. It was a counting one.

“Tobin,” he said. “Can you count?”

Tobin hesitated. “High, sir?”

Silas stared at him for half a second.

Then he laughed once through his nose.

“Honest enough. We’ll see if that survives the building.”

He opened a drawer, withdrew a small pouch, and set it on the desk with a soft clink that made Tobin’s attention drop immediately.

“Work allowance,” Silas said. “For proper clothing and required items. Not gambling. Not sweets. Not ale. Not lending to a cousin with a plan. Not buying a fine hat because you think fine hats create fine men.”

“I don’t have a cousin with a plan,” Tobin said.

“Everyone has a cousin with a plan eventually.”

Serelle picked up the pouch and placed it in Tobin’s hand before he had decided whether he was allowed to touch it.

“Keep receipts,” she said.

Tobin looked at the pouch, then at her. “Receipts?”

“Yes,” Serelle said.

“For clothes?” Tobin asked.

“For everything,” Silas said.

Tobin frowned. “What if the seller does not give receipts?”

“Go to the Packed Mule down the street,” Silas said. “Bram will get you ready enough.”

Silas leaned back in his chair. “The Crown is generous, not forgetful.”

Tobin closed his hand around the pouch. It felt heavier than anything that small had a right to feel.

“Thank you, sir,” Tobin said.

Silas motioned him away. “Do not thank me. Spend it correctly.”

Serelle was already turning back toward the door. “Come along.”

Tobin bowed, or at least attempted something bow-adjacent, then followed her out before Silas could try to find out just how high Tobin could count.

Their next stop was tucked into a nook that looked too small to survive the amount of paper inside it. A sign above the opening read Clerks and Records, though Tobin privately thought Paper Avalanche Waiting to Happen would have been more honest. Shelves rose behind the desk in leaning towers of files, ledgers, folded notices, tied bundles, room cards, staff records, wax tablets, and wooden trays filled past their intended courage. A small sign on the door read “Mabel Q.”

Behind the desk sat Mabel Quill, a sixty-five-year-old woman with soft cheeks, silver hair pinned in a loose bun, and the warmest smile Tobin had seen since arriving. She looked exactly like the sort of grandmother who would feed a man soup, ask after his mother, and know every secret in the building by supper.

“New one?” she asked.

“New one,” said Serelle.

Mabel's smile deepened. "Oh, look at you. Road still on your boots and terror still behind your eyes."

Tobin opened his mouth.

"Don't worry," she said, already turning to a stack of cards. "That wears off. Or settles in. Depends on the person."

"That's comforting," Tobin said.

"It wasn't meant to be, dear," Mabel said.

Serelle handed over his hiring letter at last. Mabel read the name, hummed, then shuffled through a box with fingers that moved faster than seemed possible for someone surrounded by that much clutter.

"Tobin, Assistant to the Waystation Attendants. Bunk assignment..." She pulled a small card free. "Staff dormitory, Bunk Room A. Bed ten. Trunk space half-width. Peg shared. Blanket issued. Pillow issued if House Laundry has forgiven us."

Tobin took the card.

"If they haven't?" Tobin asked.

Mabel smiled kindly.

"Then you learn the difference between folded clothing and a pillow."

Serelle turned away again. "He'll survive."

That seemed to be the official opinion of Tobin so far.

He'll survive.

Possibly.

If watched.

They crossed back through the Main Waiting Hall, passing the sitting guests, the bustling reception counters, and the steady movement of staff who seemed to know exactly where they were going. Tobin looked down at the bunk card in one hand and felt the coin pouch in the other. Proof of bed. Proof of money. Proof, in two small pieces, that the building had made room for him.

Maybe this could work.

The thought had barely formed before Serelle led him past the service stairway and toward a less polished stretch of the ground floor.

The air changed first.

It was not foul, exactly. Not yet. But the pleasant warmth of bread and waxed wood thinned into something wetter, sharper, and more honest. Soap. Lye. Damp cloth. Old water. The ghost of chamber pots scrubbed clean by people who had stopped believing in innocence.

Serelle stopped at the entrance to a work corridor.

"This," she said, "is where the Crown Road Waystation remains beautiful."

Tobin looked down the hall.

It did not look beautiful.

It looked like buckets.

“This building can host nobles, merchants, officers, performers, pilgrims, and half the road traffic of the kingdom because someone keeps the unpleasant parts from becoming public parts. Weekly, and sometimes more often when the building is full, you will assist with the necessary rooms.”

She began walking again, and Tobin followed.

“Bathroom laundry,” she said, pointing through one doorway where steam clung to the ceiling and damp linens waited in heavy piles. “Towels, washcloths, bath sheets, floor cloths. Some are merely wet. Some are tragic. Vaelis Mirvoss oversees rooms and linens with great care, and by great care I mean they will know if you return something folded wrong.”

Tobin nodded, because what else did a person do when introduced to laundry standards as a threat?

They moved on.

“Latrines,” she said, with the same tone someone else might use to announce a ballroom. “Guests believe they are above needing them. Staff know better. Keep them supplied, keep them scrubbed, keep them from becoming a story.”

Tobin nodded again, because what else did a person do when introduced to latrines by a woman in a bright suit?

“Bucket wash station.”

This room smelled of lye and hard work. Stacked buckets waited along one wall. Others soaked in tubs. A young worker with rolled sleeves looked up, saw Serelle, and immediately found new passion for scrubbing.

“Bathing buckets, floor buckets, stable buckets when the stable hands lose whatever private war they are fighting with order. Rowan Pike oversees exterior operations, and he is very good at making stable problems look like everyone else’s destiny. If it carries water, filth, soap, or regret, it comes through here eventually.”

“Regret has its own bucket?” Tobin asked before he could stop himself.

Serelle looked at him.

The corner of her mouth moved.

“Several.”

They continued.

“Chamber pot return,” Serelle said.

Tobin smelled it before he saw it.

No amount of royal stone, polished brass, carved trim, or guest-facing smiles could change what happened after people ate, drank, and slept. The chamber pot return was practical, tiled, drained, and organized with

military seriousness. It was also the sort of place that made Tobin understand why staff corridors had doors.

He took one breath through his nose.

Mistake. Big mistake!

“Do not make that face where guests can see it,” Serelle said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That face is for staff areas only.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

At the end of the corridor, she paused near a closed door set back slightly from the others. It was not remarkable at first glance. Plain wood. Iron handle. No sign. No polished guest trim.

Tobin might not have noticed it if Serelle had not stopped.

“And there,” she said, “is a supply closet.”

Tobin looked at it.

A supply closet.

After the latrines, laundry, bucket wash, and chamber pot return, a closet seemed harmless enough. Suspiciously harmless, maybe, but harmless.

Serelle rested her hand lightly on the handle without opening it.

“Most bad behavior in a building this size begins in one of three places: behind a closed door, beside a barrel, or with someone saying, ‘No one will notice.’ Supply closets attract all three. You will use them when instructed, return what you take, report what is missing, and avoid becoming the reason I learn your name before you have earned it.”

“You already know my name,” Tobin said.

“I know the name written on your letter,” she said. “That is not the same thing.”

Then she walked on, leaving Tobin with the uncomfortable feeling that the closet had somehow been introduced as a warning.

They reached the service stairway. Unlike the grander public stairs he had glimpsed from the entry hall, these steps were narrow, plain, and built for work instead of admiration. The stone was worn in the middle from thousands of hurried feet. The rail was smooth where hands had grabbed it without looking. Somewhere above, voices echoed down through the stairwell, mixed with the distant clatter of pans and the rising smell of cooking.

Serelle started up without hesitation.

“Second floor,” she said. “Dining and kitchen.”

Tobin adjusted his satchel, tucked the bunk card carefully away, and followed her upward.

IV. Emberhand's Kitchen

Serelle led Tobin up the service stairway without looking back, taking the steps at a pace that suggested the stairs had offended her by existing. By the time they reached the second-floor landing, the smell of cooking had thickened from a distant promise into something full and immediate: roasting meat, browned butter, sharp herbs, onions sweating in pans, fresh bread, hot iron, and steam. Tobin had only half a breath to appreciate it before Serelle turned toward what appeared to be a dead end in the service hall. The wall ahead was solid brick, or at least it had every intention of looking like solid brick. Serelle walked straight through it.

Tobin stopped.

Not slowed. Not hesitated. Stopped.

One moment she was there, bright orange suit, platinum hair, and terrifying purpose. And the next she had passed into brick as if the wall had decided she was not worth arguing with.

Her head reappeared through the masonry.

"Tobin," Serelle said.

"Yes, ma'am."

She pointed at the wall. "Wall."

Tobin looked at it. "Yes, ma'am."

"Through it."

Tobin looked at the brick.

The brick looked exactly like brick.

Serelle sighed the sigh of a woman who had already explained this too many times to people who had not yet learned that the building was allowed to be strange.

"Shimmer spell," she said. "Placed throughout the waystation so staff may move quickly without guests watching the machinery behind their comfort. Guests see walls, paneling, decorative alcoves, whatever they are most likely to ignore. Staff see the route once they know it is there."

"I do not see the route," Tobin said.

"That is because you are new," Serelle said.

"Comforting," Tobin said.

"It was not meant to be."

Then she disappeared again.

Tobin stood alone on the landing with one hand on the rail, his satchel pulling at his shoulder and the warm smell of food rolling through the stairwell like an invitation from a better life.

Go on.

You are about to walk into a wall.

She did it.

She is Serelle Vane. Walls probably apologize to her.

Tobin reached forward with one hand. His fingers touched brick for the length of a heartbeat, cool and rough beneath his skin. Then the surface shimmered like heat over a summer road, and his hand passed through. The feeling was not wet, not soft, not anything he had a proper word for. It was like pushing through a curtain made of someone else's secret.

"Right," he muttered. "Perfectly normal."

He stepped through.

The other side opened into a narrow service corridor running behind the grander parts of the floor. It was plain compared to the entry hall below, built of practical stone, dark wood, and shelves tucked into places guests would never think to look. Staff moved through it quickly, carrying trays, folded linens, covered dishes, messages, and the tight expressions of people who knew exactly how little time they had. Every so often, one of them passed through a stretch of wall and vanished. Another emerged from a place that, to Tobin's eye, had been nothing but stacked crates a moment before.

He turned slowly.

"How many of those are there?" Tobin asked.

"Enough," Serelle said.

Tobin glanced at another false wall. "That feels like the sort of answer a person gives before someone gets lost forever."

"Then do not get lost forever," Serelle said.

She started walking again, and Tobin followed before his feet could begin another debate.

They moved along the service corridor until Serelle reached another section of wall, this one faced with plain stone blocks darkened by heat and age. She did not pause. Tobin, proud of himself for learning, only paused a little before following her through.

The world exploded into a kitchen.

Heat struck him first. Not unpleasant, exactly, but large. A living heat that rolled out from ovens, fire pits, boiling pots, and iron surfaces polished black from years of use. The kitchen was wide enough to have its own weather. Steam gathered high above, curling toward vents set into the ceiling. Copper pots hung in ordered rows. Long preparation tables stretched across the room. Shelves held jars, baskets, crocks, sacks of flour,

bundles of herbs, strings of drying peppers, and more knives than Tobin believed one room should be trusted with.

And in the middle of it stood a very tall man.

He had black hair swept back from a sharp face, with a slice of dark gray running through one side like smoke caught in the strands. His coat was not quite a chef's coat and not quite a wizard's robe, but some severe marriage of the two: white and charcoal fabric, high-collared, long-sleeved, buttoned with dark metal, marked by faint stitched symbols along the cuffs. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, watching a row of floating knives dice onions with the calm attention of a general reviewing his troops.

"Chef Emberhand," Serelle said.

The tall man turned his head. "Miss Vane"

"This is Tobin. New Assistant to the Waystation Attendants."

She motioned at Tobin.

"Chef Emberhand is Director of Dining. When dining runs beautifully, guests praise the food. When it does not, they find me. I prefer they praise the food."

Chef Emberhand looked at Tobin.

Tobin had been looked at several times already that morning. Nessa had looked at him like a stain near the carpet. Serelle had looked at him like a task already late. Silas had looked at him like a number that might become incorrect.

Chef Emberhand looked at him like an ingredient.

Not a bad ingredient. Not spoiled. Just unknown, untested, and possibly dangerous if added at the wrong time.

Tobin straightened on instinct.

Chef Emberhand gave one small nod.

"Can you carry without tasting?" Chef Emberhand asked.

"Yes, sir," Tobin said.

"Can you enter a room without touching covered trays?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you recognize the difference between hot, sharp, fragile, and expensive?"

Tobin hesitated. "Usually before the screaming starts."

Serelle's mouth twitched.

Chef Emberhand did not smile.

"Answer more carefully in my kitchen," Chef Emberhand said.

"Yes, sir," Tobin said.

"Do you understand that a closed lid is not an invitation?"

"Yes, sir."

"That steam burns?"

"Yes, sir."

"That guests are not to be told what almost happened to their food?"

Tobin blinked. "Yes, sir?"

Chef Emberhand's expression did not change. "That was not a question. That was mercy wearing grammar."

Chef Emberhand turned to Serelle. "He has timing issues."

"He has been here less than an hour," Serelle said.

"Timing begins before arrival," Chef Emberhand said.

"Of course it does," Serelle replied.

"And posture."

Serelle glanced at Tobin. "He arrived by wagon."

"A wagon is no excuse for folding like wet pastry," Chef Emberhand said.

Tobin slowly adjusted his shoulders.

Serelle noticed. Of course she noticed.

"Better," she said.

Chef Emberhand's eyes moved back to him. "Marginally."

The two of them began discussing him as if he were a chair one of them might accept if the legs were reinforced.

"He will assist outside kitchen operation," Serelle said. "Dining support, event movement, maintenance requests, guest-facing recovery where appropriate. Anything structural or mechanical goes to Edrin's office before it becomes my problem. Anything involving events goes through Vivi before it becomes everyone's problem."

"Not inside production," Chef Emberhand said.

"No one said inside production."

"People often imply foolishness without hearing themselves."

"I am not people."

"No. People apologize afterward."

Tobin watched them go back and forth, only half following the words, because the longer he stood there, the more impossible the kitchen became.

There were no cooks.

Not one.

No servers rushing through with trays. No apprentices sweating over chopping boards. No scullions stirring pots. No red-faced men turning spits near the fire. The kitchen should have been packed with workers. A room this large, feeding a building this crowded, should have needed more hands than a man could count.

Instead, the work was happening by itself.

Knives flashed in the air, chopping vegetables in perfect rhythm. A spoon circled through a soup pot, lifted, tasted itself somehow, then added a pinch of something green from a nearby bowl. A pan tilted over a flame and flipped strips of meat with a hiss. Dough folded and turned beneath invisible pressure. A brush swept glaze across loaves without a hand holding it. A rack of plates drifted from one table to another, each setting itself down with soft, disciplined clicks.

Tobin stared.

Of course.

Of course the terrifying chef in the wizard-coat was a wizard.

That should have occurred to him before the self-stirring soup.

Chef Emberhand stopped speaking to Serelle so abruptly that Tobin wondered if someone had dropped something. No one had. Nothing in the kitchen seemed capable of dropping unless the chef allowed it.

The chef looked at him.

"You will come with me," Chef Emberhand said. "Say good day to Miss Vane. Then we begin."

Tobin turned too quickly.

"Good day, Miss Vane."

It came out awkwardly formal, the kind of thing a person said when trying to sound employable and instead sounding like he had learned manners from a nervous book.

Serelle accepted it with the smallest incline of her head.

"Good luck, Tobin."

That seemed kind.

Then she looked at Chef Emberhand.

"Try not to frighten him useless."

"I do not frighten useless," Chef Emberhand said. "I frighten attentive."

"See you later, Chef."

"Miss Vane."

She left through the shimmer wall without another word, bright suit vanishing into stone.

Tobin was alone with Chef Emberhand.

And the knives.

And the soup that could taste itself.

Chef Emberhand began walking the length of the kitchen, and Tobin followed immediately. Not after a pause. Not after being asked twice. Immediately.

Good.

See? Learning.

Do not congratulate yourself for following a tall angry wizard through a room full of flying knives.

Still counts.

Chef Emberhand moved past the preparation tables with long, measured steps. As he passed, the kitchen seemed to adjust around him. A floating spoon dipped lower. A pan shifted off flame. A line of chopped carrots slid from board to bowl. None of it touched him. None of it slowed him. The room obeyed the way staff had obeyed Serelle in the waiting hall, except here the staff were tools, fire, steam, and sharpened metal.

"I prepare the food," Chef Emberhand said. "I oversee the food. I approve the food. No one interferes with the food."

"Yes, sir."

"No one seasons because they think it smells plain. No one lifts lids because curiosity has hollowed out their skull. No one moves trays because they appear to be in the way. Food is not in the way. People are in the way."

"Yes, sir."

"No one tells me a guest wants it hotter, softer, sweeter, rarer, darker, lighter, quicker, slower, smaller, larger, simpler, richer, less green, more brown, or 'like my mother made it' unless they are prepared to explain the mother's method, region, tools, fat preference, grain quality, and emotional failings."

Tobin opened his mouth, reconsidered, and closed it.

Chef Emberhand noticed.

"What?" Chef Emberhand asked.

"I was going to ask if that happens often," Tobin said.

"It happens constantly."

"Ah."

Chef Emberhand continued walking. "Mothers have ruined more good service than war."

Tobin did not know whether to laugh or affirm him with another "Yes Sir"

Chef Emberhand continued before he had to decide.

"Your duties are outside production. You do not cook. You do not plate unless instructed. You do not taste unless offered. You do not rescue anything from a fire unless I tell you it requires rescuing. My servers handle service. They know the dining room, the tables, the timing, the guest temperaments, and which nobles believe themselves allergic to humility."

They passed a long table where covered serving dishes floated into formation.

“You assist where the dining operation touches the rest of the building. Clean up beyond kitchen boundaries. General maintenance reports. Moving furniture for events when Vivi has decided furniture is not where destiny requires it. Setting screens, extra chairs, banquet boards, water stands, service ropes, spare linen carts. Carrying messages. Fetching approved supplies and clearing what guests should not see before guests see it. If something breaks in the dining hall, you find the correct person. If something spills, you prevent it from becoming legend. If a guest asks you for anything you do not understand, you do not invent an answer with your youthful little mouth.”

“My mouth is not that youthful,” Tobin said before wisdom could tackle the sentence.

Chef Emberhand stopped.

The knives stopped too.

Every floating tool in the kitchen froze midair.

Tobin felt his soul quietly pack a bag.

Chef Emberhand turned.

For a moment, the room seemed to grow hotter without the fires changing.

“Do you believe,” the chef said softly, “that wit is seasoning?”

Tobin swallowed.

“No, sir.”

“Correct. Wit is garnish. Used poorly, it cheapens the plate.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Used well...” Chef Emberhand held the silence until it became uncomfortable enough to season itself. “It still does not belong in my kitchen unless invited.”

“Yes, sir.”

The tools resumed all at once.

Chef Emberhand walked on.

“You are not here to be clever. You are here to be useful. Clever may come later, if useful survives.”

Tobin followed, careful to keep his face still.

That was fair.

Rude, but fair.

“Dining is timing,” Chef Emberhand said, voice rising now with a pressure that seemed to build from somewhere below his ribs. “Timing is respect. A table seated too early becomes restless. A table seated too late becomes insulted. Soup held too long becomes punishment. Bread cut too soon dies on the board. Meat rushed is theft. Meat delayed is arrogance. A

plate is a promise made visible, and every careless hand near it is a liar waiting for permission.”

A pot behind him boiled harder.

Chef Emberhand’s shadow stretched strangely across the floor, longer than it should have been in the kitchen light.

“The Crown Road Waystation feeds travelers, merchants, guards, performers, petitioners, minor nobles, major fools, and occasionally the royal household itself. They do not come here for excuses. They come hungry, tired, proud, frightened, bored, or determined to be offended. We give them food before those conditions become everyone’s problem. Food is order. Food is peace. Food is the difference between a guest praising the Crown and a guest writing letters.”

He turned toward Tobin again, and the heat in the room seemed to lean with him.

“And nothing, nothing, nothing leaves my care worse than it entered.”

For one second, Tobin thought the fire pit flared in agreement.

Then Chef Emberhand closed his eyes.

The room settled.

When he opened them again, his voice was calm.

“I apologize,” he said. “For rambling on, but I will not apologize for my passion!”

Tobin stood very still, unsure whether surviving an apology from a wizard-chef counted as part of his training.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

Chef Emberhand nodded once.

“Good. Now we may continue.”

V. The Left-Handed Torch

Chef Emberhand led Tobin to a small nook set into the side of the main kitchen, half-hidden behind a rack of hanging copper pans and a tall shelf of flour sacks. It was not an office exactly. It was more like a desk had been placed there under protest and then surrounded by enough notes, jars, folded cloths, sharpened pencils, sealed orders, and stacked wooden trays that the kitchen had eventually accepted it as part of itself. Chef Emberhand opened a narrow drawer, removed a small leather satchel tied with cord, and held it out.

Tobin took it carefully.

“Dry goods,” Chef Emberhand said. “Enough to get you through today. Bread, hard cheese, dried fruit, nuts, and one honey oat cake because Records insists frightened new staff are less likely to faint if given something sweet.”

“I wasn’t going to faint,” Tobin said.

Chef Emberhand looked at him.

Tobin adjusted his grip on the satchel. “But I appreciate Records’ concern.”

“Report here at six in the morning for breakfast ration. Ten in the morning for lunch and dinner ration. Do not arrive early. Do not arrive late. Do not arrive during active plating unless summoned. Do not stand in doorways, breathe over trays, ask what smells good, or make the face young men make when they believe hunger entitles them to conversation.”

Tobin was not sure which face that was, but he immediately tried not to make it.

“Yes, sir.”

“After ten in the evening, you may bother me for emergency ration replacement, work-related injuries, fire, flood, blood, structural collapse, or a guest attempting to season my food.”

“What if it’s only a small fire?”

Chef Emberhand’s eyes narrowed.

Tobin cleared his throat.

“Yes, sir.”

The chef turned away and continued his walk through the kitchen, and Tobin followed with the dry goods tucked under one arm. This time he did not hesitate. He matched the chef’s pace as best he could, careful to keep behind him, not beside him, and absolutely not in front of him.

That felt worth remembering. Some people led because they were going somewhere. Chef Emberhand led because everything else had sense enough to get out of his way.

The kitchen moved around them. A spoon rose from a sauce, paused in the air, and tilted toward the chef. He tasted from it without breaking stride, considered, then lifted one finger. A pinch of salt flew from a nearby bowl and vanished into the pot. At the fire pit, long iron tongs turned a slab of meat with a hiss that sent sparks crawling upward. Chef Emberhand glanced at it once.

“Two breaths less on that side.”

The tongs obeyed.

Tobin watched a row of carrots split into perfect pieces beneath a knife with no hand on it.

Chef Emberhand stopped beside a wide preparation table where dough rounded itself into smooth balls beneath invisible palms.

“You have a task,” he said.

Tobin straightened.

“Yes, sir.”

“A simple task.”

That did not sound good. In Tobin’s experience, simple tasks were where complicated people hid knives.

“A very important simple task,” Chef Emberhand continued. “For the remainder of the day, no matter what anyone tells you, this is your task until it is complete. If a porter asks you to carry trunks, you tell him Chef Emberhand assigned you. If a maid asks you to fetch linens, you tell her Chef Emberhand assigned you. If a guard asks why you are walking with purpose instead of terror, you tell him Chef Emberhand assigned you. If Miss Vane herself asks, you tell her Chef Emberhand assigned you, and then you pray she is in a generous mood.”

Tobin nodded carefully.

“Yes, sir.”

“You will not be distracted.”

“No, sir.”

“You will not decide another task looks easier.”

“No, sir.”

“You will not abandon the work because someone with louder boots gives a louder order.”

“No, sir.”

“You will complete it, return directly to me, and report the result.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chef Emberhand studied him for a moment. The firelight moved across his face, catching the dark gray streak in his hair until it looked almost like ash beside coal.

"I am left-handed," he said.

Tobin waited, because that sounded like the beginning of a trap.

Chef Emberhand lifted his left hand.

"This hand has served kings, sealed treaties, ended duels, mended bones, split stone, bound stormlight, and perfected the only acceptable shallot reduction in the three kingdoms."

Tobin decided very quickly that nodding was safer than speaking.

Chef Emberhand lowered his hand.

"It has also burned through my last left-handed torch."

The kitchen seemed to hush around them.

Tobin looked at the chef.

Then at the fire pit.

Then at one of the torches mounted along the kitchen wall.

Then back at the chef.

The words formed in his head before he could stop them. Unfortunately, his mouth was closer than wisdom.

"Are not all torches left-handed if you hold them in your left hand?"

For one clean second, nothing happened.

Then the fire pit roared.

Not flared. Roared.

The flames climbed higher, bright and sudden, throwing heat across the kitchen hard enough that Tobin felt his eyebrows reconsider their future. Every floating knife stopped in midair. The boiling pots stilled, though the water inside them trembled. Steam curled backward as if trying to retreat. Somewhere above, the hanging pans gave a soft metallic shiver.

Chef Emberhand turned slowly.

The room turned with him.

Tobin's earlier suspicion settled into certainty with both boots.

Wizard.

Very wizard.

Possibly the kind of wizard people wrote laws about after surviving him.

Chef Emberhand's voice came low and even, which somehow made it worse.

"Do you believe I have reached my years, my station, and my mastery of flame without understanding the common handling properties of a torch?"

Tobin's tongue tried to hide behind his teeth.

“No, sir.”

“Do you believe I would send a new assistant wandering through the waystation for amusement?”

That question felt more dangerous because the honest answer was beginning to look like yes.

“No, sir.”

“Do you believe the term left-handed torch is a jest?”

Tobin looked at the fire pit, which was still too large and much too interested in his answer.

“No, sir.”

“Good.”

The heat held for another breath.

Tobin swallowed.

“I am sorry, sir. Yes, sir. I will go get your left-handed torches right away, sir.”

Chef Emberhand stared at him a moment longer.

Then he lifted one finger.

The flames settled.

The knives resumed chopping.

The soup began stirring again, though Tobin could have sworn it stirred more judgmentally than before.

Chef Emberhand pointed toward a far wall where the stone shimmered faintly near a stack of serving boards.

“Out.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tobin did not ask if that was a door. Asking felt like an excellent way to become an ingredient in tomorrow's special he assumed. He hurried toward the shimmer, hoping with every step that it was, in fact, a passage and not just a decorative spell meant to embarrass people with poor survival instincts.

At the last moment, the wall wavered.

Tobin stepped through it and found himself in the service corridor again.

Only then did he breathe.

Behind him, the kitchen sounds continued: chopping, boiling, sizzling, the steady movement of impossible work under impossible command.

Tobin adjusted the dry goods under his arm and looked down the corridor.

Left-handed torches.

Of course.

First day, first task, and already a wizard might turn him into a pig and cook him if he came back empty-handed.

He started walking quickly, because walking quickly looked almost the same as knowing where he was going

VI. The Red Door Supply Closet

Tobin headed back the way he had come, or at least back in the direction he hoped counted as back. The second-floor service corridor looked different without Serelle in front of him. With her, every passage had seemed selected and approved. Without her, the walls became walls again, the corners became questions, and every shimmer in the stone looked like it might lead somewhere useful, forbidden, or deeply embarrassing. He found the service stairway by following the cooler air and the sound of feet below, then nearly stepped into the path of a server rushing past with a covered tray balanced on one hand and a stack of folded cloths tucked under the other arm.

“Sorry,” Tobin said, shifting aside. “Do you know where I’d find left-handed torches?”

The server did not stop.

“Red Door Supply Closet.”

Something about that sounded far too easy.

Even Tobin, new as he was, knew better than to trust an answer that simple.

And where is—”

Right then, the server vanished around the corner.

Caught with one hand half-raised, Tobin stared after him.

Hardly an answer.

Really, it was only the beginning of an answer wearing the clothes of a whole one.

Exactly thirty steps into the task, his stomach dropped.

Down the corridor, the server’s head suddenly popped back around the corner.

“Down one floor,” he called. “First floor.”

Of course, that still did not tell Tobin where on the first floor he was meant to look.

“Oh,” Tobin muttered. “Helpful—in the way a locked door is technically a wall with ambition.”

Really, first floor was something.

First floor was where he had already survived several conversations and one chamber pot corridor. Compared to the kitchen, that practically made it familiar country. He started down the service stairs, one hand on the worn rail, moving quickly enough to look purposeful and slowly

enough not to trip himself into becoming Chef Emberhand's next lesson about gravity.

By the time he reached the ground floor, the noise of the kitchen had faded behind him, replaced by the lower, wider murmur of the waystation at work. Tobin stepped into the back corridors and began looking for red. That, at least, seemed simple.

A Red Door Supply Closet would have a red door.

Probably.

Unless shimmer spells made it look blue. Or like a wall. Or like a decorative alcove guests were most likely to ignore. Or unless "Red Door" was a person's name, which would be exactly the kind of thing this place would do just to see if new assistants cried before noon.

He turned down one back hallway, then another, passing plain doors, marked doors, half-open doors, and one door that smelled strongly enough of vinegar to discourage investigation. None of them were red. He was leaning slightly to peer down a narrower passage when a warm voice spoke behind him.

"Hello there."

Tobin turned.

A woman approached from the direction of the Guest Support Station, her expression kind enough to make him immediately suspicious that he looked worse than he thought. She was dressed neatly, though less sharply than Serelle, with the kind of practical polish that suggested she had already solved twelve problems this morning and forgiven nine people for causing them. Her smile was soft. Her eyes were careful.

"Are you in need of scraps, dear?" she asked gently. "Or a place to sit a moment? You mustn't wander back here without help. The guards get very proud of themselves when they find someone to escort out."

Tobin looked down at himself.

Dusty boots. Road-worn clothes. Satchel. Dry goods tucked under one arm. No uniform yet. Probably the expression of a boy who had recently been threatened by a wizard over a torch.

Fair.

"I'm not— I mean, thank you, but I'm not here for scraps."

"Oh." Her smile did not vanish, but it changed shape. "Then are you lost?"

"That feels more likely every time someone asks."

"New staff?"

"Yes. Tobin. Assistant to the Waystation Attendants."

Her face brightened with recognition.

"Oh! Tobin. Of course. Serelle said you had arrived." She offered her hand.

"Maribel Thorne, Guest Relations Attendant. I'm usually over at Guest

Support, and if anyone loses anything, forgets anything, misplaces anything, or insists something was stolen by ghosts when they packed it under their own stockings, it finds its way to me.”

Tobin shook her hand.

“Good to meet you, ma’am.”

“Maribel is fine when we are not rescuing a guest from their own temper.” She glanced down the corridor. “So, Assistant to the Waystation Attendants, what has you searching back halls with the face of someone trying not to be eaten by the architecture?”

Tobin took a breath.

“Chef Emberhand assigned me a task.”

Maribel’s eyebrows lifted just a little.

“Did he?”

“He said I’m to stay on it no matter what anyone else tells me, and if anyone says anything, I’m to say Chef Emberhand told me to do this and only this until it’s done.”

“That does sound like Chef.”

“I’m looking for his left-handed torches.”

Maribel stared at him.

Not blankly. Not cruelly.

Almost kindly.

Then she nodded as if he had asked for towels.

“Oh, yes. Those would be behind the Red Door Supply Closet.”

Tobin felt a small, dangerous bloom of hope.

“You know where that is?” Tobin asked.

“I think so.” She turned and pointed with perfect confidence. “Out by the wagon shed, near the back. It moves around a bit in people’s telling, but if I remember right, that is where they keep odd maintenance stock and things no one wants guests asking about.”

Tobin let out a small breath. “That sounds like a supply closet.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Maribel said.

Tobin should have questioned the phrase moves around a bit in people’s telling. He should have. A wiser version of himself, older by even one full day, might have paused there and asked why a supply closet had rumors.

But Maribel had been kind, and kind people were easier to believe when your morning had included Nessa, Serelle, Silas, and Chef Emberhand in rapid order.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Of course. And Tobin?”

He stopped.

“If you are going outside, drink water when someone offers it. People forget that nerves dry you out faster than summer.”

That was an oddly specific kindness.

“I will.”

He excused himself and followed the back corridor toward the rear of the waystation, passing through a service door that opened onto the backside of the building. The change hit him all at once. Inside had been polish and controlled noise. Outside was work without the courtesy of walls.

He came out almost directly across from the hay barn and feed shed, where the smell of dry grass, grain dust, and animal feed rolled warm and heavy into the open air. To his left stood the stable complex, larger than some villages, with wide doors, long rooflines, busy hands, and horses shifting in shadow. The smell coming from it was not one smell but a full argument: hay, sweat, leather, damp straw, manure, oiled wood, and the sour authority of the dung pit nearby. Tobin looked toward the pit once and decided that was enough looking for a first day.

To his right sat the wagon shed.

It was not a shed in the way Tobin understood sheds. It was a long, open-sided repair house big enough to shelter several wagons at once, with tool racks along the posts, spare wheels stacked against the walls, axle beams laid across trestles, and a roof high enough for men to work without crouching. Hammers rang somewhere inside. A wheel leaned at an angle near the entrance like it had given up on travel and taken to resting.

Tobin started toward it and had to jump back almost immediately as a wagon rolled across the back road between him and the shed.

“Mind the road!” someone shouted.

“I am beginning to understand that roads are where people put wagons,” Tobin called back, then instantly wished he had said nothing.

The wagon driver either did not hear him or did not care, which Tobin was learning was one of the road’s greatest mercies.

He crossed after it passed, stepping around a muddy rut and into the wagon shed’s shade. The air inside was cooler, packed with wood dust, iron, grease, old rope, and the clean sharp smell of freshly cut lumber. Tobin scanned the walls.

Brown door. Open stall. Tool rack. Wheel hooks. Pegboard. Another brown door. A hanging tarp. No red.

He walked deeper inside, peering behind a stack of crate boards.

Still no red.

Maybe behind meant behind the wagon shed. Maybe “Red Door Supply Closet” meant a closet near a red door, not a red closet door. Maybe Chef Emberhand had already turned him into a pig and this was simply how pigs experienced confusion.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

The voice came from behind him, low and sudden enough that Tobin nearly collided with a hanging harness.

He turned to find a broad-shouldered man striding toward him from between two wagons. The man was about thirty, sun-browned, solid, and dressed like someone who had never once been afraid of mud because mud knew better than to start trouble with him. His sleeves were rolled. His boots were work-worn. A coil of rope hung from one shoulder, and he carried a short-handled tool Tobin could not name but immediately respected.

The man’s eyes narrowed.

“Who are you, and why are you snooping around my wagon shed?”

Tobin took one step back.

Then another, because the man kept coming.

“I’m not snooping.”

“That was a very snooping-shaped answer.”

“I’m Tobin. New Assistant to the Waystation Attendants.”

The man stopped.

Tobin lifted both hands slightly, dry goods still tucked awkwardly under one arm.

“Chef Emberhand sent me on an important task. I’m looking for left-handed torches. Maribel said they were behind the Red Door Supply Closet out here by the wagon shed.”

The change was immediate.

The man stood a little straighter. The suspicion left his face so quickly it almost looked practiced. In its place came a calm smirk, not unkind, but carrying the unmistakable weight of someone who had just understood the joke and had no intention of saving Tobin from it.

“So you’re the new Assistant to the Attendants.”

“Yes.”

“Well then.” He shifted the rope higher on his shoulder and offered his hand. “Rowan Pike. Grounds Attendant.”

Tobin shook it.

Rowan’s grip was firm enough to make Tobin aware that he owned fingers.

“Good to meet you, sir.”

“Rowan is fine unless Serelle is watching. If Serelle is watching, all of us are suddenly much more official.”

“That seems wise.”

“It is survival.” Rowan glanced toward the wagon shed. “You’ll be helping around my side too. Exterior work. Dung pits, wagon shed, stable complex, hay barn, feed shed, gardens, front lawn, road edge, seasonal flowers, inside flowers when Guest Experience remembers people like looking at living things, and whatever the weather breaks before Edrin Holt can tell me it was my fault.”

“That’s a lot.”

“That’s grounds.” Rowan started walking, and Tobin followed because apparently that was the shape of his life now. “Pretty parts and ugly parts. Same job. If the front beds bloom, guests say the waystation is charming. If the dung pit backs up, guests say the whole kingdom is collapsing.”

“Does it?”

“Only when ignored.”

“The kingdom?”

“The dung pit.” Rowan looked at him sideways. “Usually.”

They walked past the edge of the wagon shed toward a stone-lined well set between the working yard and the garden path. The well was old, round, and shaded by a simple timber frame. A leather water bag hung from a hook nearby. Rowan took it, dipped it deep, waited until it filled, then pulled it up with the easy motion of a man who had done the same thing ten thousand times without considering it impressive.

He tied it off and tossed it to Tobin.

Tobin caught it badly but successfully, which felt like the theme of the day.

“Drink,” Rowan said.

Tobin hesitated.

“It’s water.”

“I know.”

“Then drink it before you start looking at it like Silas handed you a contract.”

Tobin drank.

The water was cold enough to surprise him. It cut through the kitchen heat still clinging to his throat, through the dust from the road, through the tightness of the morning. He drank more than he meant to and lowered the bag with a quiet breath.

“Thank you.”

Rowan nodded toward the garden beds nearby, where green leaves pushed up in careful rows and flowers brightened the service yard more than it deserved.

“Plants wilt when they forget water. Animals get mean. People get stupid. This place makes all three happen faster. You want to survive here, stay watered before someone has to tell you.”

Tobin looked at the water bag, then at Rowan.

“That sounds like advice people pretend is about water.”

“It is about water,” Rowan said. “Mostly.”

Tobin handed the bag back.

“Thank you. Mostly.”

He started toward the waystation again, crossing back toward the rear service entrance with a little more steadiness in his legs. He made it several steps before the important part of his task remembered itself.

He turned quickly.

“Rowan?”

The Grounds Attendant looked over from the well.

“The left-handed torches. Where exactly are they?”

Rowan rested one hand on the well frame, calm as a man watching a seed sprout.

“Behind the Red Door Supply Closet.”

“Yes, but where is that?”

“Fourth floor.”

Tobin stared.

Rowan pointed upward, not at any window in particular.

“Fourth floor. Ask near the guard side. Someone will know.”

Of course.

First floor. Wagon shed. Fourth floor.

A simple task.

“Right,” Tobin said.

Rowan’s smirk deepened. “Walk with purpose.”

“I’ve been told it looks almost like knowing where I’m going.”

“Then you’re halfway trained.”

Tobin turned back toward the waystation, now less certain than ever that the building contained one Red Door Supply Closet or any mercy at all. He crossed the back road more carefully this time and headed toward the rear entrance.

Then, as he passed the edge of the garden, he caught a smell that stopped him.

Not horse. Not dung. Not bread. Not herbs for soup or flowers for guests.

This was different.

Familiar.

Warm, earthy, sharp-sweet, and curling through the air like a secret trying not to laugh.

Tobin turned his head slowly.

Somewhere beyond the garden beds, hidden between the green rows, the clipped hedges, and the service-side plantings, someone was having a very good time.

A good time he could really use, considering his day had begun with anxiety, passed through coin, chamber pots, shimmer walls, flying knives, and now involved finding a torch that apparently had floor preferences.

He looked back at the service entrance.

Then toward the garden.

Go inside. Chef Emberhand said task only.

Find the smell. Just for a moment.

That is how disasters begin.

It might also be how a man finds out where the Red Door Supply Closet actually is.

Tobin adjusted the dry goods under his arm, took one careful step toward the garden, and decided that a moment of investigation was not the same thing as abandoning the task.

VII. Behind the Garden Shed

Tobin followed the smell through the garden like a man following music he was not supposed to hear.

It slipped between the rows of green things and flowering things, curling beneath the honest scents of damp soil, crushed stems, sun-warmed leaves, and whatever herbs Chef Emberhand probably knew by name. The garden sat tucked against the service side of the waystation, half useful and half beautiful, with vegetable beds laid in careful lines and bright flowers placed where guests might glimpse them from the right window and think the world was better managed than it was.

The smell was behind all of that.

Loud, but not careless.

A secret with smoke on it.

Tobin moved past a row of beans, around a stack of empty planting crates, and toward a little shed set back from the main path. It was weathered gray, roof patched twice, door hanging a little crooked, and surrounded by tools that had clearly been used by someone who knew where everything belonged and still preferred a bit of mess for comfort.

Behind the shed, a man sat on an overturned bucket with one boot stretched out and the other planted in the dirt. He had a joint pinched between two fingers, his head tilted back against the shed wall, looking like he had discovered the only quiet corner in the entire Crown Road Waystation and intended to defend it with patience.

Their eyes met.

Tobin froze.

The gardener did not.

He lifted two fingers in a lazy wave.

“Either come over or stop standing there like a guilty scarecrow.”

Tobin looked back toward the Waystation, then toward the gardener, then at the smoke curling from his hand.

This was a bad idea.

This was also the first thing all morning that had smelled like a good idea.

He stepped behind the shed.

The man looked him up and down with calm amusement. He was older than Tobin, but not old. Maybe late twenties, maybe thirty, with sun-browned skin, relaxed shoulders, and the kind of easy expression that

suggested he had already decided most emergencies were only emergencies because people insisted on hurrying.

“Harlan,” the man said. “Garden work, mostly. Herb beds, trimming, pretending flowers have opinions worth respecting. You must be the new one.”

Tobin blinked. “Does everyone know that already?”

“Everyone who pays attention.”

“That feels worse than everyone knowing.”

“It is.” Harlan took a slow pull from the joint, held it a moment, then let it drift out to the side. He looked Tobin up and down again, this time with a smirk. “Must be your first day. Did you get your work allowance from the old man?”

Tobin stared at him in disbelief.

The stranger not only knew he was new, but somehow already seemed to know exactly what kind of morning he had been having.

“Yes,” Tobin said. “He did. I’m supposed to get my uniform and work tools, but I’m not sure what tools exactly I need yet.”

Harlan chuckled.

“Well, I’ll let you join for a coin.”

He motioned the joint toward Tobin.

Tobin looked at it with an honesty he probably should have hidden better, then touched the small pouch at his belt.

“Silas said I’d need receipts,” he said. “Every coin accounted for.”

Harlan laughed outright at that.

“Of course he did.” He leaned back against the shed wall and pointed lazily with the joint. “The neck cloth only costs a coin at the shop, and you can always find a free one in Lost and Found behind Maribel’s office if you know how to ask nicely. There. Receipt solved.”

Tobin hesitated for one last moment.

This was foolish.

This was irresponsible.

This was probably the best idea he had heard all day.

He untied the little pouch, fished out a single coin, and handed it over.

Harlan took it, tucked it away somewhere in his coat, and passed him the joint.

Tobin took a long drag.

For one second the whole morning vanished behind the pull of smoke and warmth and memory. He held it in, letting the feeling spread through his chest, settle behind his eyes, and carry him just a little bit away from the waystation, the stairs, the kitchen, the pressure, the whole impossible first day of it all.

Then he exhaled slowly.

Harlan watched him and lowered his voice almost to a whisper.

"Just breathe, kid. Everything'll be chill as long as you stay chill about it."

Tobin took another breath, this one easier.

That helped more than he wanted to admit.

They stayed there a while, passing the joint back and forth in the little hidden corner behind the shed while the waystation carried on without them. Tobin asked questions, and Harlan answered the way relaxed men answered things: half advice, half opinion, and just enough truth tucked inside the jokes to matter.

"What's life actually like here?" Tobin asked after a while.

"At the waystation?"

Tobin gave him a flat look.

"No. Behind the shed."

Harlan grinned and pointed at him with two fingers.

"You'll do fine if you learn when not to say half of what you think."

"I've received similar reviews already."

"From Serelle?"

"And Chef Emberhand."

Harlan winced. "Same day?"

"Same morning."

"You poor bastard."

Tobin took another drag and handed the joint back.

Harlan rested his head against the shed and looked out toward the garden.

"Life here's simple, if you don't confuse simple with easy. Learn the paths. Learn who actually knows things. Drink water. Eat when you can. Never stand in front of a wagon. Never trust a guest who begins with 'I'm not complaining, but.' Never touch Chef's food. Never fold linen where Vaelis can see it unless you want to experience disappointment as a weapon. And if Rowan tells you something smells wrong, believe him before your nose catches up."

"That is a lot of never."

"It's a large building."

Tobin nodded slowly, feeling the edge of the day loosen around him.

That was the thing, really. The way everything unclenched just enough to make the world manageable again. The building was still big. Chef Emberhand was still angry. Serelle still had teeth behind the smile. The left-handed torches were still nowhere to be found. But it all seemed a little less determined to kill him now.

Eventually the joint burned low between them.

Tobin looked back toward the waystation rising above the garden beds.
“I’m supposed to find left-handed torches.”

Harlan’s face did something interesting.

First it went still.

Then amused.

Then carefully unhelpful.

“Ah.”

“You know about those?”

“I know about many things that do not make sense.”

“And the Red Door Supply Closet?”

Harlan laughed, then soft and genuine, shaking his head as he pinched the last of the joint out against a flat stone near his boot.

“Some things around here don’t make sense, but they still have to be done.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is a very old answer.”

“I’ve been told first floor, wagon shed, and fourth floor.”

“Then wherever the last attendant told you to go is where you should go next.”

“That also feels like not an answer.”

“It is the only one I’m giving.” Harlan pushed himself up from the bucket and brushed dust from his hands. “But if you last the week, meet me behind the shed by the rear staff entrance.”

Tobin looked up at him.

“You offering guidance?”

“I’m offering perspective. Guidance sounds like work.”

Tobin snorted softly.

“Thanks, Harlan.”

“For what?”

Tobin considered.

“The joint. The advice. The lie that any of this is simple.”

Harlan grinned.

“That part’s free after the first coin.”

Tobin said his goodbyes and headed back toward the inside of the waystation, toward the rear service entrance, toward the stairs, and toward the fourth floor where, hopefully, he might finally find these left-handed torches and the supposed Red Door Supply Closet.

Or whatever this task really was.

VIII. Walk With Purpose

Tobin came back from behind the shed by way of the herb patch, moving with the careful confidence of a man who believed he was sneaking and the loose-footed honesty of a man who absolutely was not.

The herbs brushed at his boots and ankles as he slipped between them: sharp green sprigs, low purple flowers, broad leaves with silver fuzz along the edges, and one plant that smelled so fiercely of pepper it made his nose twitch. The joint had not made the world strange, exactly. The world had already been strange. It had made the strangeness less aggressive about it. The waystation still towered above him. The task still waited. Chef Emberhand still existed somewhere above and behind him with flying knives and opinions about torches. But the tight knot behind Tobin's ribs had loosened enough that he could breathe around it.

He cut through the Kitchen Garden, trying not to step on anything that looked expensive, edible, or likely to be missed by someone with a clipboard. Rows of vegetables stretched in neat little armies. Beans climbed poles. Cabbages crouched like green heads. Something red and round hung from a vine, watching him with what felt like judgment. Tobin gave it a respectful distance.

He emerged near the well where Rowan had given him water earlier.

Good. Known place. Familiar place. Just need to get to the rear entrance beyond that. Simple.

The problem with simple was that it kept attracting witnesses.

Rowan stood near the well with another man, both of them turned slightly toward the service yard as if discussing something practical and unpleasant. Rowan saw Tobin at the exact moment Tobin was trying very hard to look like a person who had simply appeared from the garden for normal work-related reasons. The other man looked over too.

Tobin pretended not to notice them. This was made difficult by the fact that he had absolutely noticed them.

He focused instead on the road between the garden and the rear entrance. Wagons had already tried to kill him once today. He looked left. He looked right. Then left again, because the second look had felt too quick.

"Tobin, right?"

Tobin jumped hard enough that his satchel bumped against his side.

Rowan had walked up beside him with the other man following at an easier pace. Rowan's face held the same calm, work-worn amusement as before, but his eyes were sharper now.

"What are you doing out here?" Rowan asked. "Didn't I send you back inside near half an hour ago?"

Tobin opened his mouth.

Nothing useful arrived.

"Yes," he said, which was true and therefore dangerous because it required more words. "I mean, I was. I did. I went. Inside. Mostly."

Rowan's eyebrow rose.

The other man stopped beside him. He was older than Rowan, broad in the shoulders, with weathered hands, a practical coat, and the kind of face that looked as if it had spent years listening to buildings complain. His hair had begun giving way to gray, and there was a small bunch of dried stems tucked through one of the loops on his belt, as casual as another man might carry a knife.

Tobin looked from Rowan to the stranger, then back to Rowan.

"I got turned around," Tobin said.

That was not entirely false. He had been turned around morally, geographically, and possibly professionally.

"Turned around," Rowan repeated.

"Yes. Ended up near the front side. Thought it better to come back around through the rear instead of marching through the guest entrance again looking like..." Tobin glanced down at himself. "This."

Rowan studied him for a moment.

The older man gave a small nod, as if Tobin had accidentally said something sensible.

"Smart," the man said. "Image is everything here. Guests forgive less than they claim and remember more than they should."

Tobin straightened a little.

"Thank you, sir."

The man offered his hand. "Edrin Holt. Director of Facilities."

Tobin took it. Edrin's grip was firm, but not crushing. Practical. Like a man testing whether a hinge held.

"Tobin. Assistant to the Waystation Attendants."

"So I hear." Edrin looked him over, not unkindly. "First day treating you well?"

Tobin considered the question.

There were several possible answers.

I have been accused of loitering, counted by an old man, warned by a woman with teeth in her smile, introduced to chamber pots, passed

through a wall, threatened by a wizard-chef, sent after imaginary torches, and bribed into a garden smoke break by a man behind a shed.

“Doing good,” Tobin said.

Rowan made a small sound that might have been a cough, if coughs could be amused.

“Mostly,” Tobin added. “Just trying to find these left-handed torches Chef Emberhand tasked me with finding.”

Edrin chuckled, low and warm.

“Ah. Chef.”

“Yes, sir.”

“He can be intimidating.”

Tobin thought of the fire pit roaring high enough to make his eyebrows reconsider their future.

“A bit.”

“But as long as you do not change his food, season his food, touch his food, question his food, breathe too boldly near his food, or imply that food is merely something people eat, he will not hurt you.”

Tobin waited.

Edrin smiled faintly.

“Probably.”

“Comforting,” Tobin said.

“It was meant to be.” Edrin glanced toward the waystation. “Best be off, then. I think you will find the Red Door Supply Closet on the fourth floor.”

Tobin stared at him for half a breath.

Fourth floor again.

That made two.

Two was almost a pattern.

Or a trap wearing a pattern’s coat.

“Thank you, sir.”

Rowan gave him a look that said walk with purpose without bothering to say it aloud.

Tobin looked both ways, waited for a wagon loaded with feed sacks to rattle past, then crossed the road quickly and reached the entrance near the Old Wash Hall without being flattened. A victory. Small, but honest.

Inside, the back hall greeted him with damp stone, old soap, lye, and the ghostly reminder that the waystation was beautiful only because other parts of it were not. The smell was still bad, but not as bad as before. Or maybe Tobin was changing. That seemed worse. No man wanted to become comfortable around the chamber pot return before lunch on his first day.

He moved through the hallway and found the service stair.
Fourth floor.
He started upward.

IX. Mirror of Standards

The stairwell was narrow, practical, and just steep enough to make him aware of every breath. By the time he passed the second-floor landing, the smell of Chef Emberhand's kitchen pressed through the walls again: roasted meat, hot iron, herbs, bread, and authority. Tobin did not stop. He kept going.

Third floor.

As he reached the landing, he heard someone being corrected.

Not shouted at.

Corrected.

That was somehow worse.

The voice came from the room just outside the service stair, calm and precise and sharp enough to cut cloth without wrinkling it.

"No. Again."

A quieter voice answered, too low for Tobin to catch.

"No," the first voice said. "A fold is not a surrender. It is a statement. This statement says you were tired, careless, or privately angry at the sheet. Which is it?"

Tobin paused with one hand on the stair rail.

He should keep going.

Fourth floor. Red Door. Left-handed torches. Chef Emberhand. Fire.

But the open doorway was right there, and the voice had the kind of control that pulled curiosity toward it like a hook.

Tobin leaned just enough to look around the corner.

Then he rubbed both eyes with the heel of one hand.

Once.

Twice.

No change.

"What," he whispered, "did Harlan give me?"

In the room beyond, a figure stood beside a linen cart and a half-made bed, holding a folded sheet between long, precise fingers. They wore the standard Waystation uniform, but on them it looked less issued and more judged into obedience. Their skin was pale with faint patterns running across the face, neck, and hands like mycelium beneath glass. Reflective eyes caught the room's light in a way human eyes did not. Long ears, elegant and pointed, tucked beneath a red mushroom cap that grew from the scalp itself and sloped back over the head and neck like a natural hood,

bright red with pale speckling like something from a forest tale told by someone who had actually seen the forest answer back.

They were not delicate.

That was Tobin's first clear thought after the shock.

Strange, yes. Beautiful in a severe and unsettling way, yes. But not delicate. They stood like a ruler laid against a crooked line, composed entirely of measurement and consequence.

The person beside the cart, a maid by the look of the apron and guilty posture, held another sheet and looked as if she would rather face a guard inspection.

The mushroom-capped figure smoothed one hand along the folded linen, then stopped at a corner.

"Drath," they murmured.

The maid winced.

Tobin stood in the doorway and stared.

He had heard stories, of course. Everyone had heard stories. Other things that lived out in the wide parts of the world. Old things. Living walking plants. Stone-people with families in the mountain roads. Riverkin in the marsh and waterways. Mushroom folk too, although the storyteller had been drinking.

But stories were one thing.

A person with a red cap growing from their head inspecting bed linens like the fate of the realm depended on corners was another.

The figure turned.

Their reflective eyes found him immediately.

Tobin's spine straightened before the rest of him had agreed.

They looked him up and down with calm, devastating accuracy.

"You do not look like you belong here," they said. "Who are you?"

Right.

Real, then.

Not Harlan's fault.

Probably.

"Tobin," he said, then cleared his throat because the first attempt had come out too thin. "Tobin. Assistant to the Waystation Attendants."

Their expression changed at once.

Not softened, exactly. It became pleased in the way a perfectly closed drawer might be pleased.

"Ah. Tobin." They set the folded sheet down with ceremonial disappointment and stepped toward him. "Vaelis Mirvoss. Rooms Attendant. Thalenfolk."

The word landed between them with the weight of something older than the room.

“Thalenfolk,” Tobin repeated carefully.

Vaelis’s reflective eyes narrowed by the smallest degree.

“Yes. If that is an issue, you may leave now.”

There was no raised voice. No threat. No visible anger, really. But the sentence carried such clean intensity that Tobin felt it pass through several layers of him before stopping somewhere near his boots.

“No,” he said quickly. “No issue. I only— I’ve never met— I mean, not that meeting is— I just didn’t know—”

Stop. Stop digging a hole.

“I have no problem,” Tobin finished.

Vaelis watched him for another breath.

Then they smiled.

It was not warm the way Maribel’s smile had been. It was sharper. More formal. Like approval granted in writing.

“Good,” they said. “Then follow me. We have much work to do, and your training has just begun.”

They swept past him toward the service stair.

Tobin turned after them. “Actually, I’m already—”

Vaelis continued up the stairs.

“Rooms are the breath of hospitality,” they said, not looking back.

“Guests forgive a poor road if the bed is clean. They forgive a delayed meal if the basin is filled. They do not forgive if the blanket smells of cellar dew rather than fresh lavender. Comfort is not softness. Comfort is control.”

“I understand, but Chef Emberhand—”

“Chef Emberhand controls food,” Vaelis said. “I control rest. Both are holy in different ways, though his produces more shouting.”

Tobin followed because apparently every superior in this building had learned the same trick: begin walking and let his legs handle the argument.

They reached the fourth floor.

The public guest hall stretched ahead, quieter than the lower floors but not empty. The air smelled of clean linen, beeswax, baked bread, dried flowers, and the faint closed-room scent of travelers’ belongings. Vaelis moved straight down the hall toward the guest stair side, their stride smooth and exact, their red cap bright beneath the softer upper-floor light.

The first set of doors they passed were closed. Heavy doors. Official-looking doors. Guard-sturdy. Tobin glanced at them and wondered if

those were the kind of doors that got a man corrected by spear if he guessed wrong.

The second set stood open.

On the left, maids moved through a larger room lined with multiple beds and guard gear set in ordered places. Royal Guard guest barracks, Tobin guessed, based on the armor stands, weapon racks, and the fact that every blanket looked like it had been bullied into square corners. On the right, another maid worked in a standard chamber, smoothing a bed while a wash basin sat ready on a small stand. Vaelis's head turned just enough to inspect both rooms as they passed.

"Left bed, third corner," Vaelis said without slowing.

A maid inside the barracks flinched and immediately returned to the bed.

Tobin almost missed a step.

They had not even gone inside.

Vaelis noticed everything.

He fell half a pace behind, staring through the open doors, and had to hurry to catch up when Vaelis opened another door near the hall. This room looked like it had once been a sitting area. A desk stood near the window. Shelves held linen records, room cards, scent jars, spare keys, small folded cloth samples, and stacks of notes arranged so neatly they seemed afraid of disappointing their owner. A chair faced the desk. Tobin suspected it was where people sat to learn what they had done wrong. Vaelis sat behind the desk.

Only then did Tobin finally get enough space in the conversation to force words through.

"Chef Emberhand gave me a task," he said. "Before I came up here. He told me to stay on it until it was done and not let anyone distract me. I'm supposed to find left-handed torches. He said they're stored somewhere, and everyone keeps telling me to look behind the Red Door Supply Closet, but no one seems to agree where that is."

Vaelis went still.

Not dramatically. Not like Chef Emberhand and his roaring fire.

Still like a needle stopping over a flaw in cloth.

"Drath," they said.

Tobin blinked.

"Drath?"

Vaelis looked at him.

"Thalren for shit."

"Oh."

The sensible thing would have been to stop there.

Tobin did not.

“Thalren?”

Something in Vaelis’s face tightened. Not rage. Not embarrassment. Irritation refined into a single polished edge.

“Drathen ulvren, nae quor.”

Tobin stared at them.

Vaelis inhaled once through the nose.

“It means this is a shitty mess, and now there are questions.”

“Ah,” Tobin said.

That did explain the tone.

Vaelis rested their long fingers on the desk, fingertips aligned with unnatural care.

“Mirvoss is Thalren as well,” they said, perhaps because Tobin’s face had not yet settled into anything intelligent. “Mirror of Standards.”

Tobin glanced around the office. The folded cloth samples. The records. The perfect stacks. The scent jars set in careful rows.

“That seems... fitting.”

“It is meant to be.” Vaelis’s gaze sharpened. “When you are done with this trivial pursuit, return to me for work. You will need training in room readiness, linen movement, bathing preparation, and how not to destroy folded order with human hands.”

“My hands are not—”

Vaelis looked at his hands.

Tobin stopped.

“My hands will be trained,” he said.

“Better.” Vaelis leaned back slightly, and when they spoke next, the words came with the flat stiffness of something repeated many times and enjoyed not at all. “The left-handed torches are in the Red Door Supply Closet.”

Tobin waited.

Vaelis waited back.

“Do you know where that is?” Tobin asked.

Vaelis’s expression did not change, but the room somehow grew less welcoming.

“I do not know where she is,” they said. “And I do not have time for this stupidity anymore. Leave me.”

“Yes. Of course. Thank you.”

Vaelis had already turned to a stack of linen records, one long finger tracing a line of script as if Tobin had been filed away with the other errors of the day.

He stepped out of the office and closed the door carefully behind him. Not too hard.

For a moment, he stood in the fourth-floor hall with clean linen and baked bread in the air, distant maids moving in open rooms, and the muffled life of the waystation breathing around him.

Left-handed torches.

Red Door Supply Closet.

She.

Tobin frowned.

Why had Vaelis said she?

And why, with every new answer, did he feel less like a man completing an important task and more like the center of a very elaborate joke designed by people with far too much time on their hands?

X. A Trap Wearing a Pattern

Tobin stood outside Vaelis' office with one hand still near the door handle, afraid for a moment that he had closed it wrong.

He waited half a breath to see if the door would open again and Vaelis would correct him on hinge etiquette. It did not. That should have helped. It did not.

Left-handed torches.

Red Door Supply Closet.

She.

The hallway stretched quiet around him, smelling of clean linen, beeswax, baked bread, and dried flowers. Somewhere behind one of the open chamber doors, a maid snapped a sheet with the crisp violence of someone who had recently been told a fold could have moral failings. Down the hall, the service stair waited.

Tobin started toward it.

You cannot screw this up.

The thought arrived sharp and urgent.

You are already screwing this up.

He kept walking.

No. He was doing the task. Maybe poorly. Maybe with more questions than progress. But doing a thing badly was not the same as failing. Not yet. You are going to screw this up.

His hand tightened around the strap of his satchel.

Why are you like this?

That one landed harder than the others.

Tobin stopped beside a narrow window near the end of the hall and looked out before his own thoughts could dig any deeper. The view faced toward the road and the broad shape of the land beyond the waystation. The sun had dropped low, turning the sky gold at the edges and setting long shadows across the yards, sheds, wagons, and roofs below. The day was not over, but it was leaning that way.

Almost supper.

Almost evening.

Almost the end of his first day, and he still had no torches, no answer, and no idea whether he was being trained, tested, or passed from one amused superior to another like a bad message.

He looked down at his boots, then remembered the coin pouch at his belt.

The Packed Mule.

Silas had told him to go there if he wanted receipts that would survive being handed back to the Crown. A proper shop down the road, stocked with everything a new worker might need to look less like he had been hired by accident. Uniform pieces. Work tools. Maybe boots. Maybe whatever counted as “required items,” since no one had yet told him what those were, only that he was expected to purchase them correctly.

And since the sun was lowering, he had better go before the place closed.

Besides, if he could not find the damned left-handed torches, he could at least return tomorrow dressed like someone who belonged badly instead of someone who did not belong at all.

Then he remembered Harlan.

More accurately, he remembered the coin he had given Harlan.

The coin he was supposed to account for.

The coin that had become a joint, a hidden shed, a few deep breaths, and the best part of his first day by such a wide distance that it hardly seemed fair to compare it with the rest.

Worth it.

Still.

Silas wanted receipts.

Harlan had said the neck cloth only cost a coin at the shop, but also that a person could sometimes find one free in Lost and Found behind Maribel’s office if they knew how to ask. Tobin did not know how to ask, exactly, but he had been wandering the waystation all day asking questions badly. One more could not ruin the pattern.

Probably.

XI. Lost and Found

He took the service stairs down.

The first-floor hall received him with the familiar damp breath of soap, lye, old stone, and all the unpleasant things that polite guests believed vanished by magic. Tobin moved past the work corridor, keeping his eyes forward and his breathing careful, and found the side door that opened into the Guest Support Station.

He poked his head in first.

The station was quieter now. The earlier swarm of guests had thinned to nothing, leaving the counter, the shelves, the Lost and Found alcove, and a single receptionist behind the desk. Not Maribel. Someone younger than Maribel but older than Nessa, with her sleeves rolled and her hair pinned badly enough to suggest the day had been winning.

She looked up.

“Yes?”

Tobin stepped in slowly, trying to look harmless and staff-like at the same time. He suspected he achieved neither.

“Hello. I’m Tobin. First day. Assistant to the Waystation Attendants.”

The receptionist’s mouth twitched.

“First day explains a lot.”

“Does it show?”

“Only everywhere.”

“Right.” Tobin cleared his throat. “I was hoping you could help me. I was told Lost and Found might have spare neck cloths. Red, if possible. I need one for uniform, and I am trying very hard not to make Silas appear in my future holding a ledger.”

The receptionist giggled, light and quick.

“That is wise.”

She pointed behind herself toward a low shelf beneath the Lost and Found alcove, then bent out of sight and came back up with a wooden bin so full of random treasures and forgotten relics that Tobin immediately understood why Maribel had a whole station for guest problems.

The receptionist set it on the counter with a thump.

“Freshest bin. If it bites, tell me before you bleed on the counter.”

“Has that happened?”

“Not to me.”

Again, not comforting.

Tobin began sorting.

The bin contained three gloves that did not match each other, a cracked comb, two ribbons, a dull brass button, a child's carved horse, a little bottle labeled only For Throat, six neck cloths in colors no uniform should be forced to accept, a tin whistle, a spoon, a folded letter with no name on it, and something wrapped in blue cloth that hummed faintly until Tobin decided not to touch it.

Then he saw red.

He pulled the neck cloth free and lifted it into the air like a captured banner.

Victory.

Actual victory.

Small, possibly stolen-adjacent victory, but victory all the same.

The receptionist laughed.

"Need me to mark that claimed?"

"Yes, please. Properly. With whatever records make Silas least likely to know my name more than he already does."

"Smart boy."

Tobin smiled down at the red neck cloth, then glanced back into the bin.

That was when he saw the shoes.

Dark green dress shoes, half-hidden beneath a folded scarf and a traveler's cap. Not bright green. Not ridiculous green. A deep, rich green, like shaded leaves after rain. His favorite color.

He pulled them out.

They were scuffed at the toes, but good leather. Better than anything he owned. Tobin looked at the receptionist.

"Are shoes also claimable?"

"If they've been in the bin more than thirty days and no one can describe them better than 'my shoes,' yes."

"Have these?"

She leaned over, checked a small tag tied through one lace, and nodded.

"Forty-two."

That seemed like permission from the universe.

Tobin slipped one on.

Then the other.

They fit.

They fit perfectly.

For one glorious moment, Tobin almost jumped where he stood. He caught himself because there was a receptionist watching, and because

jumping in borrowed shoes from Lost and Found felt like the sort of thing that turned joy into injury.

"They fit," he said.

"I can see that."

"They fit exactly."

"That does happen with shoes."

"No, but—" Tobin looked down at them again. "They're green."

"Yes."

"Dark green."

"I had noticed."

"My favorite color."

The receptionist smiled, softer this time. "Then I suppose they were waiting for you."

Tobin wanted to say something clever. Nothing arrived. So he simply nodded.

"Thank you."

The receptionist marked both items in a little ledger and waved him off before he could ask whether Silas accepted Lost and Found as a receipt. Tobin decided not to ask. Some questions were best saved until they became someone else's problem.

He stepped back through the side door into the service hallway with a red neck cloth in hand and dark green shoes on his feet.

The day had not been a success.

But it had produced shoes.

That counted for something.

He turned toward the rear exit, then paused.

A porter passed ahead of him, carrying a bundle of rolled mats, and disappeared through what looked very much like a dead end.

Tobin stopped.

The wall was plain stone. No door. No handle. No sign. But the porter had stepped out from it. Tobin was sure.

A shimmer.

It had to be.

And if it was a shimmer, it might lead outside near the staff entrance. Maybe not the exact staff entrance he wanted, but outside was outside, and outside meant road, and road meant The Packed Mule.

For once, Tobin decided not to overthink it.

Confidence rose in him, small but real.

He had walked through shimmer doors before. Twice. Almost gracefully the second time.

He walked toward the wall.

Straightened his shoulders.
Did not slow.
And crashed face-first into solid stone.
The sound was not dignified.

Neither was the way he bounced back, tripped over his own newly acquired green shoes, and landed hard on the floor.
For a moment, he lay there staring up at the ceiling.
The ceiling offered no explanation.
“Of course,” Tobin said.

He sat up slowly, pressing one hand to his nose and the other to the floor. Nothing broken. Pride damaged beyond repair, but he was beginning to suspect pride did not survive long at the Crown Road Waystation anyway.
He looked around.
No porter.
No shimmer.
No door.

Just a wall that had apparently decided Tobin was exactly the sort of person walls were built to stop.
“Where did he come from?” Tobin muttered.
A distant voice somewhere around a corner called, “You all right?”
“Yes,” Tobin called back immediately. “Wall inspection.”
No answer.
That was probably for the best.

He pushed himself to his feet, brushed dust from his clothes, adjusted the red neck cloth under one arm, and looked for another way out.
The nearest available exit was the one he least wanted.
Through the Chamber Pot Return.
Tobin stared toward it.
No.
Absolutely not.
He looked back at the wall.
The wall remained a wall.
Tobin sighed.
“Fine.”

He went through the Chamber Pot Return holding his nose the entire time.

The passage was tiled, drained, practical, and offensive in ways that felt personal. Even with most of the day’s work done, even with soap and water and whatever powders the staff used to convince the air not to quit, the place still smelled like every guest in the waystation had joined together to

make a point. Tobin hurried through, shoes clicking against damp stone, one hand pinching his nose, the other holding his neck cloth and dry goods as far from the room as possible.

“I will learn this place,” he muttered through blocked nostrils. “Every hall. Every stair. Every false wall. Every cursed shimmer door. I will know it all.”

A bucket sat near the exit, looking smug.

“And I will never use this way again unless death is behind me and even then I may compare options.”

He pushed out through the side exit and into open air.

The evening hit him cool and wide. After the chamber pot passage, even the service yard smelled like freedom. Horse dung, hay, wagon grease, road dust — all of it felt practically floral by comparison.

Tobin started toward the road.

Near the garden side, he spotted a figure by the shed and lifted a hand.

“Harlan?”

The figure turned.

It was not Harlan.

It was another worker entirely, holding a rake and staring at Tobin with the blank caution of a man who had just been waved at by a stranger emerging from the chamber pot exit wearing green shoes and carrying a red neck cloth.

The worker did not wave back.

Tobin lowered his hand.

“Not Harlan,” he said, and immediately began walking faster.

He reached the road, turned away from the waystation, and headed down toward The Packed Mule.

Behind him, the Crown Road Waystation rose in the low sun, huge and bright and impossible, every window catching gold as if the building had not spent the day swallowing him whole and sending him back out by way of filth.

Tobin walked with purpose.

Or something close enough to it.

The left-handed torches could wait a little longer. The Red Door Supply Closet, whoever or whatever she was, could keep hiding. For now, he needed uniform pieces, tools, receipts, and possibly a better understanding of walls.

Tomorrow would bring whatever tomorrow brought.

Tonight, he was going to buy what he needed, account for what he could, and try not to think too hard about the fact that he still had to return to Chef Emberhand empty-handed.

He glanced down at the dark green shoes.
At least one part of the day fit.

XII. The Packed Mule

The road to The Packed Mule was not long, which was fortunate because Tobin spent most of it inside his own head and very little of it paying attention to where his feet were going.

The Crown Road Waystation stayed behind him like a mountain with windows. Even when he did not look back, he felt it there: bright in the low sun, full of stairways, false walls, sharp-eyed attendants, hidden halls, and at least one supply closet that had been referred to as she.

She.

Why had Vaelis said that?

And why had everyone said Red Door Supply Closet like it was a place, except no one seemed to agree where that place was?

First floor.

Wagon shed.

Fourth floor.

Behind.

Beside.

Ask someone else.

Go there.

Not there.

The more Tobin thought about it, the more the whole thing felt less like a task and more like being dropped into a barrel and rolled downhill by committee.

You should have known.

No. He could not have known.

You did know. Left-handed torch? Really?

He frowned at the road.

All torches were left-handed if a person held them in the left hand. That had been his first thought. His correct thought. His thought before Chef Emberhand had made the fire pit sound offended on behalf of the entire culinary profession.

Maybe the trick was not finding the torch.

Maybe the trick was surviving everyone's confidence while they sent him after it.

Or maybe he was just thinking too much because the day had been long, his feet were sore, and Harlan's joint still had the edges of the world wrapped in soft cloth.

He nearly walked past The Packed Mule.

THE PACKED
GENERAL SUPPLIES FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

He pushed open the front door.

Tobin barely heard it. His mind was still caught halfway between Chef's fire, Vaelis's reflective eyes, and the question of whether a supply closet could be female, alive, or both.

The voice cut through his thoughts at once.

He looked up.

Behind him, shelves rose in crowded layers: rope and line, travel gear, tools and repairs, folded cloth, stacked boots, soap, dried rations, lantern oil, small blades, blankets, buttons, buckles, and a dozen other things Tobin suddenly suspected he needed.

The man's expression brightened with recognition.

Tobin looked down at himself. “Which look?”

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“That is very specific.”

“It is a very specific road.” He offered a hand. “Bram Kettlewick. Manager of The Packed Mule.”

Tobin shook his hand. Bram’s grip was warm, firm, and brief. A proper shopkeeper’s grip. Enough to greet, not enough to waste time.

“Good to meet you, sir.”

“Bram will do unless a tax collector is present.” Bram looked him over again, not rudely, but thoroughly. His eyes paused on the red neck cloth under Tobin’s arm, the green shoes on his feet, and the satchel at his side.

“You must be here for the rest of your uniform, then.”

“Yes. I think so. I need... several things. Probably more than I know.”

“That is also the first-day look.” Bram pointed toward the back of the shop. “West room. Clothing and garments. Royal Waystation section is in the far corner. Should have what you need to look official enough for people to start blaming you for things. Pants, button shirts, overshirts, work jackets, spare neck cloths, belts if your current one has suffered from optimism.”

Tobin glanced toward the direction Bram pointed.

“Thank you.”

“Welcome to the area, Tobin. Let me know if you need help finding anything else. Bring it up when you are done, and I will make sure Silas gets the sort of receipt that lets him sleep at night.”

Tobin stopped.

“You know Silas?”

Bram smiled.

“Everyone with a ledger knows Silas.”

Tobin thanked him again and made his way through the shop.

The Packed Mule was larger inside than it looked from the road, or maybe it only felt that way because every inch of it had been filled with useful things. Shelves leaned close on both sides. Barrels sat under tables. Hooks hung from beams. Signs marked sections in tidy lettering: TRAVEL GEAR, TOOLS & REPAIRS, DRIED RATIONS, BOOTS, LANTERNS, CLOTHING, SOAP, ODDS & ENDS, and one small shelf labeled THINGS PEOPLE FORGET THEY NEED UNTIL THEY NEED THEM.

Tobin passed that one twice as slowly.

His list was short because his knowledge was short.

Pants.

Button-up undershirt.

Overshirt.

Maybe a work jacket if coin allowed.

Maybe socks.

The west room was near the back, beyond a rack of walking sticks and a stack of folded blankets. The smell changed there from oil, rope, and dry goods to cloth, leather, cedar chips, and old wool. Shirts hung from pegs. Pants were folded in stacks. Jackets lined a wall by size, color, and purpose. Tobin saw three different shades of brown that looked identical until he stepped closer, at which point they became a moral puzzle.

He began looking for anything that matched what he had seen on the staff that day.

Royal red neck cloth.

Practical pants.

Button shirt.

Overshirt or jacket with room to move.

Clean, but not fine.

Official, but not expensive.

XIII. Vivi Lark's Answer

He was squinting at two nearly identical shirts when he stepped sideways and bumped into someone.

"Oh, sorry," he said at once, turning. "I didn't—"

He stopped.

A young woman stood beside a rack of event ribbons and bright oversashes, holding three folded pieces of fabric over one arm. She could not have been much older than Tobin, but she had the kind of presence that made age feel like the least important thing about her. Her hair was styled with careless perfection. Her clothes were practical enough for work, but arranged like the entire shop might become a stage if she found the right corner of light. She wore color as if color owed her rent.

Tobin knew her.

Not personally.

Of course not personally.

But he knew her face.

He had seen it on a poster at the wagon exchange station two towns back, smiling beneath curling letters that promised:

VIVI LARK'S PARTY AT THE MOAT
MUSIC, LIGHTS, GAMES, AND NIGHT MARKET DELIGHTS

His mouth opened before his judgment could tackle it.

"Oh my gods," Tobin said. "I know who you are."

The young woman blinked, then smiled like she was trying not to enjoy that too much.

"You do?"

"You're Vivi Lark." He pointed, then immediately realized pointing was strange and lowered his hand. "I saw your picture. On a poster. The Party at the Moat. I can't believe I'm meeting you on my first day here. My name is Tobin."

Vivi laughed, bright and quick.

"Well, that is a much better introduction than most people manage after bumping into me." She shifted the fabrics in her arms and gave him a little bow that was half performance, half joke. "It is nice to meet you, Tobin. What brings you to this part of the kingdom?"

"I got hired," he said, still a little too fast. "At the Royal Waystation down the road. Assistant to the Waystation Attendants."

Vivi's smile remained for one more second.

Then something behind it changed.

Her eyes widened.

“Oh.”

Tobin felt his own smile falter.

“What?”

“Oh no.”

“What does oh no mean?”

Vivi pressed the folded fabric against her chest and looked toward the ceiling as if asking the beams for mercy.

“I forgot.”

Tobin’s stomach sank. “Forgot what?”

“Something very important.” Then she looked back at him, and her expression shifted again, the panic becoming theatrical determination.

“But fate has a way of smiling on those who spread joy.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means I found you before Serelle found me not finding you.”

That did not help.

Vivi stepped closer and lowered her voice, though not enough to suggest she actually cared who heard. “Tobin, I am Vivi Lark. Entertainment and Events Attendant at the Royal Waystation.”

Tobin stared at her.

“One of my bosses?”

“One of your five bosses,” she said, raising a finger. “And before you make that face, yes, I know. Five is too many. But Serelle told me I could be paid to throw parties, arrange games, plan guest entertainments, dress rooms for celebration, oversee rooftop evenings, manage musicians, argue with jugglers, and make rich people feel like they are spontaneous. It was the perfect job.”

“That does sound good, but.”

“It is good. Mostly. Except for the paperwork. And the guests who think ‘festive’ means ‘impossible by sunset.’ And this very strange tradition where the new Assistant to the Waystation Attendants gets sent all over the building looking for the Red Door Supply Closet.”

Tobin went still.

Vivi noticed.

“Oh,” she said softly. “They started already.”

Tobin felt several pieces of the day line up in a way he did not enjoy.

“The left-handed torches,” he said.

Vivi made a face.

“Yes. Those.”

Tobin stared at her.

“I knew there wasn’t any such thing as a left-handed torch.”

"Of course there isn't."

"I said that."

"To Chef?"

"Yes."

Vivi winced so hard it looked painful.

"Oh, Tobin."

"The fire pit roared."

"I imagine it did."

"He asked if I believed his task was amusement."

"That sounds like Chef."

"And everyone kept telling me Red Door Supply Closet."

"That also sounds like everyone."

Tobin leaned against the clothing rack with one hand.

"I have been to the first floor, the wagon shed, the fourth floor, behind a garden shed, Guest Support, Vaelis's office, and possibly through personal ruin."

"On your first day?"

"Yes."

Vivi looked impressed despite herself.

"You lasted longer than the last one."

That was not the comfort she seemed to think it was.

"The last one?"

Vivi bit her lip.

Then she sighed.

"You are the fifth assistant this moon cycle."

Tobin stared at her.

"The fifth."

"Yes."

"This moon cycle."

"Yes."

"And none of them made it past the first task?"

Vivi tilted her hand back and forth. "One made it to supper."

"That is not past the task."

"No," she admitted. "But he did eat."

Tobin turned away for a moment and looked at a wall of folded pants.

The shop seemed suddenly too warm.

A wild goose chase.

An initiation.

A test.

A joke.

Maybe all of them at once.

“You are telling me,” Tobin said carefully, “that the entire day has been some kind of old initiation ritual.”

“Weird old initiation ritual,” Vivi corrected. “Important distinction. I do not care for it.”

“That helps very little.”

“I know.”

He looked back at her. “So what do I do?”

Vivi shifted the fabrics to one arm and pointed toward a shelf beyond the work jackets.

“Find a torch.”

“A normal torch?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Give it to Chef Emberhand.”

“As a left-handed torch.”

“Yes.”

“He will know.”

“Of course he will know.”

“Then why would that work?”

Vivi smiled.

“Because the task is not to find a left-handed torch, Tobin. It is to stop running around long enough to decide what answer you are willing to stand behind.”

That sounded almost wise.

He hated that it sounded almost wise.

“So I lie to Chef Emberhand.”

“No. You present him with a torch held in your left hand and say, ‘Chef, I found your left-handed torch.’ If he asks why it is left-handed, you say, ‘Because I am holding it in my left hand.’”

Tobin blinked.

“That is what I said this morning.”

“Yes,” Vivi said. “But this time say it like someone who has survived the building.”

That sat in him differently.

Tobin looked toward the racks of clothing.

“I need uniform pieces.”

“Of course you do. Come on.”

She led him deeper into the back corner, where a small sign marked ROYAL WAYSTATION STAFF. The garments there were plainer than the bright event pieces, but better organized than anything else in the room. Pants in sturdy browns and blacks. Button shirts in cream and

white. Overshirts and work jackets in dark practical cuts. A small row of red neck cloths hung beside them, though Tobin ignored those with the smug satisfaction of a man who had already discovered the lost and found. "This is your section," Vivi said. "Start with two undershirts if you can. One pair of pants at minimum, two if Silas has not frightened all generosity out of your pouch. Overshirt. Work jacket if you can manage it. And do not buy the stiff one unless you enjoy moving like a cupboard." Tobin touched one jacket and immediately put it back.

"Cupboard."

"Exactly."

"Thank you," he said.

Vivi gave him a quick smile, and for a second she seemed less like the woman from the poster and more like another worker trying to keep the day from eating someone new.

"I hope I see you later, Tobin."

"At the waystation?"

"Well, yes. But preferably not crying behind the linen carts."

"I will try to avoid that."

"Good." She gathered her fabrics again and started away, then turned back. "And do not let Emberhand's bullshit get to you too much."

Tobin stared.

"I did not expect you to say that."

"That is why I said it." She flashed him one last grin. "Goodbye, Tobin."

"Goodbye, Vivi."

She disappeared between the racks with the easy brightness of someone who could leave a room and somehow make it feel like she had taken some of the music with her.

Tobin stood there a moment longer.

Then he picked out what he could afford.

Two button undershirts.

One pair of sturdy pants.

One overshirt.

A work jacket that did not make him move like a cupboard.

He hesitated over a second pair of pants, counted his coins, remembered Harlan's invitation if he lasted a week, and put the pants back with hope.

Then, after thinking of Chef Emberhand, he added one plain torch from a nearby barrel marked HOUSEHOLD & TRAVEL TORCHES.

Just one.

Normal.

Right-handed, left-handed, and all other directions depending on grip.

He carried everything back to the center counter.

Bram looked up from his ledger as Tobin approached. His eyes moved over the stack of clothes, the torch, the red neck cloth, the green shoes, and Tobin's face.

"Find everything all right?"

"Yes," Tobin said. Then, after a second, "And more than I thought I would."

Bram's mouth curved.

"That happens here."

Tobin set the items on the counter. "Thank you for the service."

"Service is easy when customers gather the right piles." Bram began sorting the items with practiced speed, marking each on a sheet as he went. "Two shirts. Pants. Overshirt. Work jacket. One torch."

"A necessary torch."

"I assumed it was not decorative." Bram glanced up. "You have a neck cloth?"

Tobin held up the red one.

"Lost and Found."

"Good. Belt?"

Tobin touched his own.

"Good enough for today."

"Boots?"

Tobin looked down at the green shoes.

"Also Lost and Found."

Bram leaned slightly over the counter to inspect them.

"Those are not work boots."

"No."

"They are good shoes."

"Yes."

"They fit?"

"Perfectly."

Bram nodded as if that settled something private between him and the universe. "Then keep them for when you need to look slightly more respectable than you feel. You will still want boots eventually."

"Eventually is likely after I earn more than one day's allowance."

Bram's eyes sharpened with amusement.

"You are missing a few key pieces."

"I know," Tobin said. "I already had some, and I do not have the coin for everything new yet. Something came up."

"Something."

"Yes."

Bram studied him.

Then he smirked.

“Someone’s cousin?”

Tobin froze.

Silas’s voice returned from earlier with awful clarity.

Not lending to a cousin with a plan.

Tobin narrowed his eyes. “Does everyone with a ledger know everything?”

“Only the useful things.” Bram finished writing, tore the receipt cleanly, and placed it on top of the folded clothes. “Good gear. Fair price. Honest measure. Give that receipt to Silas before he asks for it. It makes him less dramatic.”

“Silas is dramatic?”

“Not where anyone can prove it.”

Tobin took the wrapped bundle and receipt. “Thank you, Bram.”

“Welcome to the road, Tobin. And to the waystation.”

Tobin tucked the receipt safely away, balanced the clothes under one arm, held the torch in the other hand, and headed for the door.

The bell rang again as he stepped outside.

Evening had settled deeper over the road. The last of the sunlight clung to the upper windows of the Crown Road Waystation behind him, while ahead and just beyond the great building waited the Royal Waystation Staff House.

His living quarters.

Bed ten.

Half-width trunk space.

Shared peg.

Pillow issued if House Laundry had forgiven them.

Tobin adjusted his bundle and started down the road, past the waystation, toward the place where the staff slept when the building finally stopped asking things of them.

In his hand, the torch felt plain and ordinary.

That was the point, apparently.

Tomorrow, he would have to hand it to Chef Emberhand and see whether ordinary could survive being called left-handed.

For now, Tobin walked toward the Staff House in the deepening evening, carrying his first uniform, his first receipt, his first proper clue about life at the waystation, and one very normal torch.

XIV. The Crown Road Staff House

The Royal Waystation Staff House sat just beyond the main building, close enough to belong to it and far enough away to pretend it had its own mind.

It was smaller than the waystation, of course, but almost everything was smaller than the waystation. The staff house was still large by normal standards: three stories of timber and stone, warm windows, a practical roof, and a front door that looked as if it had seen every kind of exhausted worker lean against it. A narrow yard stretched to one side, with packed dirt, a few benches, a worn patch of grass, and space enough for games, arguments, laundry disputes, and whatever else staff did when guests were not watching.

Tobin stood outside for a moment with his bundle under one arm and the torch in his other hand.

His first day had begun with him standing outside a door, trying to convince his feet to carry him inside.

Apparently, that was the shape of his life now.

Go in.

You already survived the bigger one.

That does not make this one safe.

No, but it probably has fewer flying knives.

Probably.

He opened the door.

The inside of the staff house smelled of old wood, stew, boots, candle smoke, laundry soap, and people who had stopped pretending the day had not touched them. The entry hall was plain but busy, with hooks along one wall, a notice board covered in scraps of paper, and a long bench beneath it where someone had abandoned a pair of muddy work gloves with great confidence.

A man stood near the board, reading one of the notices with his hands clasped behind his back.

He turned before Tobin had made it three steps inside.

"You are Tobin."

It was not quite a question.

The man was lean, middle-aged, and dressed in simple dark clothes that suggested authority without any desire to impress. His face carried a somber patience, as if he had long ago accepted that staff housing was mostly a matter of preventing adults from behaving like unsupervised

children. His tone was firm, official, and somehow tired enough to prove he had been doing this longer than anyone deserved.

"Yes," Tobin said. "That's me."

"Oren," the man said. "Overseer of the Staff House."

Tobin shifted his bundle and held out his hand, then realized Oren had not offered one. He lowered it with what he hoped looked like intention.

"Good to meet you."

"I have been expecting you for some time now." Oren looked him over.

"Glad you showed up earlier rather than later."

Tobin glanced toward a window, where evening had nearly finished settling.

"This is earlier?"

"For staff housing, yes." Oren turned and motioned for him to follow.

"Come."

Tobin followed because by this point in the day, following authoritative people through doors had become less a choice and more a survival instinct.

Oren led him through a side door, down a short hall, and up a set of narrow stairs that creaked in specific places, as if warning new residents where not to sneak. As they walked, Oren began speaking in the same somber, measured tone.

"House rules are posted on the board inside the front hall. Read them. Pretend to remember them. Then read them again when someone else breaks one and you wonder why I am knocking on your bunk frame."

"Yes, sir."

"Oren is fine. Sir makes people think I have more power than I do, and less patience than I have."

Tobin nodded.

"There are two boards you need to know. House notice board inside. Job notice board outside by the yard gate. They are not the same board."

"That seems important."

"It is. The house board tells you what affects living here. Bed openings, meal notices, laundry issues, curfews, complaints, repairs, lost items, found items, and reminders that candles are not to be left burning near curtains no matter how romantic someone believes themselves to be."

Tobin blinked.

"That needed a notice?"

"Twice." Oren reached the top of the stairs and opened another door.

"The job board outside is for extra work, shift calls, short labor needs, event setup, cleanup crews, and any department trying to borrow hands

without starting a fight. Check both. Daily. The wrong board ignored at the wrong time can cost you sleep, coin, or standing.”

They entered a long room filled with bunk beds.

The room was not fancy, but it was not cruel either. Rows of bunks stood along both sides, each with a trunk at the foot, a peg or two nearby, and just enough space between them to suggest privacy had been considered and then rejected due to cost. Some bunks were neat. Some were not. A few had blankets rolled tight, others had shirts hanging from posts, boots tucked underneath, little charms tied to bed frames, a book left open face-down, a wooden cup, a spare sock, someone’s attempt at dignity.

Tobin held his bundle a little tighter.

Oren walked between the bunks without looking around, as if he could sense disorder through the floorboards.

“Rec yard is out back,” he continued. “Open for anyone to use when not on duty. Cards, dice, sparring, music, reading, sitting, shouting at the sky, throwing balls, throwing horseshoes, or whatever else people decide is fun after a day of being useful. It remains open as long as it remains safe.”

“And if it does not?”

“It closes.”

“For everyone?”

“For everyone.”

“That seems unpopular.”

“It is meant to be.”

Oren stopped at a set of bunks near the middle of the room and bent to open the trunk at the foot of one bed. He checked inside, closed it, then handed Tobin a small iron key.

“This trunk is yours. Keep it locked.”

Tobin took the key.

“Always?”

“Always.”

“Even when I am nearby?”

“Especially then. People steal less often from strangers than from familiar faces they believe will forgive them.”

Tobin looked down at the trunk.

That felt like the kind of sentence a man learned the hard way.

“Yes, Oren.”

Oren pointed to the adjacent bunk bed.

“Middle bunk. That one is yours.”

Tobin looked.

There were three stacked beds. The bottom looked closest to civilization. The top looked closest to death. The middle looked like compromise had been built in wood.

"Middle," Tobin repeated.

"If beds open up, it will be listed on the house notice board. Seniority decides who gets first claim if more than one person wants the same opening. Do not argue seniority with me. I did not invent it, but I enjoy enforcing it."

Tobin nodded.

Middle bunk.

Bed ten.

Trunk space half-width.

Peg shared.

It was real now in a way the bunk card had not been.

Oren glanced toward the bedding, then gave a short sigh.

"No pillows at the moment."

Tobin looked at him.

"House Laundry has not forgiven us?"

Oren's expression shifted by one almost invisible degree.

"So Records warned you."

"Mabel did."

"She would." Oren folded his hands behind his back again. "There is an ongoing issue with the laundry workers. Until it is resolved, you may use folded clothing, rolled blanket, or poor choices."

"I have experience with poor choices."

"I suspected."

Oren moved to the window and looked down toward the yard, where a few workers were gathering near a bench with bowls in hand.

"House meals are posted below, but the usual times are morning before first shifts, evening after main service, and late bowl for those kept past proper hours. If you miss a meal, you miss a meal unless your department sends word. Do not come to my office angry because your stomach failed to keep schedule."

"Yes, Oren."

Without warning, Oren turned and tossed a small sack at him.

Tobin caught it against his chest, barely keeping hold of his bundle and the torch.

"Food," Oren said. "Enough for tonight. Bread, meat, apple, and whatever sweet thing Cook's helper believed would keep new staff from looking tragic."

Tobin looked into the sack.

There was, in fact, something sweet wrapped in cloth.

“Thank you.”

“If you need anything else, find me in my office. First floor. Door with the sign. If the sign says I am unavailable, I am unavailable. If the matter involves blood, fire, theft, structural collapse, or someone attempting to climb out a window for romantic reasons, knock anyway.”

Tobin stared.

“Again?”

Oren’s face did not change.

“Different person.”

Then he turned and left the room.

No farewell. No lingering. No wasted motion.

The door closed behind him.

Tobin stood alone beside his bunk with his bundle, his torch, his food sack, his key, his thoughts, and the growing suspicion that every person in authority at the Crown Road Waystation had been trained to walk away before he finished processing what had happened.

XV. The Middle Bunk

Slowly, he set the torch on the trunk.
Then he climbed into the middle bunk.

It took more effort than he expected and less dignity than he hoped.
The bed creaked under him, then accepted his weight with a tired groan.
Tobin sat with his back against the wall, opened the food sack, and pulled out the bread.

For a while, he ate without thinking.
That was nice.

Bread did not ask him questions. Meat did not send him to another floor. The apple did not require a receipt. The sweet thing, which turned out to be a little honey cake, did not care whether he knew where the Red Door Supply Closet was.
But the quiet did not last.

Once his hands were still and his mouth had something to do, his mind returned to the day and began laying pieces on the table.

Chef Emberhand had started it.

The left-handed torches.

The Red Door Supply Closet.

Then the server had sent him to the first floor.

Maribel to the wagon shed.

Rowan to the fourth floor.

Edrin had agreed.

Vaelis had been annoyed by the whole thing.

And Vivi had told him the truth.

Or part of it.

Tobin chewed slowly.

Was everyone in on it?

Serelle?

She had known he was new. She had handed him through the building like a letter being passed to each department. Had she known Chef would send him after a fake torch? Had she expected it? Had she allowed it because that was simply what happened to new assistants?
Silas?

No. Silas had seemed too concerned with coins to care about torches.
Unless the whole thing had a line in a ledger somewhere.

New Assistant Initiation: one torch, several hours, no refund.

Tobin snorted softly around a bite of apple.

But the attendants were in on it.
At least some of them.
Maribel had smiled too kindly.
Rowan had looked too amused.
Edrin had given the answer too easily.
Vivi had known the tradition and hated it.
Vaelis...
Tobin paused.
Vaelis had said she.

He sat up a little straighter in the bunk, nearly knocking his head against the slats above him.

"That's what they meant," he whispered.

The Red Door Supply Closet.

She.

Vivi.

Vaelis had not meant a closet.

They had meant Vivi.

Vaelis had been supposed to send him to Vivi.

Or maybe everyone had been supposed to pass him from attendant to attendant until he reached the one who would finally explain the ritual. Chef to the staff. Staff to Maribel. Maribel to Rowan. Rowan to Edrin. Edrin to Vaelis. Vaelis to Vivi.

But Vaelis had been annoyed and busy and had not played their part the way the others had.

And Tobin, by pure accident, had found Vivi anyway.

He sat there in the middle bunk, holding the last piece of bread, and let that settle.

It was not just a prank.

Not exactly.

It was a path.

A ridiculous, humiliating, badly explained path designed to drag the new assistant through the departments and see if he could survive being confused, corrected, teased, and redirected without quitting.

Five assistants this moon cycle.

None had made it past the first task.

Tobin looked down at the torch resting on his trunk.

Tomorrow.

That was the real question now.

What did he do tomorrow?

He could walk into Chef Emberhand's kitchen, hand him the torch, and say the line Vivi had given him.

Chef, I found your left-handed torch.

If Chef asked why it was left-handed, Tobin could say, Because I am holding it in my left hand.

Simple. Clean. Smart.

Or he could do something else.

He could tell Chef he had looked all over the waystation and could not find one, so he went to town and purchased a left-handed torch special from a traveling merchant. Just for him. A proper answer dressed as obedience. A small polite jab wrapped in helpfulness.

That tempted him.

More than it should.

Or he could tell the truth.

That he knew it was a lie. That the torch did not exist. That the Red Door Supply Closet was not a closet. That they had all sent him wandering for their own amusement, or tradition, or training, or whatever name people gave cruelty when they wanted it to sound useful.

He imagined saying that to Chef Emberhand.

He imagined the fire pit.

He imagined his eyebrows leaving his face forever.

No.

Not that.

Not yet.

Tobin leaned his head back against the wall and stared across the bunk room. A few other staff had drifted in while he ate. Someone was whispering near the far end. Someone else unlaced boots with a sigh that sounded older than they were. A trunk lid closed. A blanket rustled. The staff house settled around him, full of strangers who already knew how to belong here better than he did.

His first day had been a joke he did not understand until nearly the end.

Fine.

Let it be a joke.

He was still here.

He had not quit.

He had not run back down the road.

He had not been flattened by a wagon, stabbed by flying knives, corrected to death by Vaelis, financially destroyed by Silas, or fully swallowed by the Chamber Pot Return.

He had a bunk.

He had a trunk.

He had a uniform.

He had a receipt.

He had a torch.

And tomorrow, he would return to Chef Emberhand.

Tobin felt something inside him settle. Not confidence, exactly. Confidence was too clean a word for it. This was rougher. Stubbornness with sore feet. Pride with bruised edges. A small, ugly little ember that refused to go out simply because the room had gotten dark.

They could laugh if they wanted.

They could test him.

They could send him through every hall, stair, yard, shed, shimmer, office, and foul-smelling exit in the building.

He had been hired to do a job.

He was going to do it.

Tobin climbed down from the bunk and opened the trunk. He placed his folded clothes inside carefully, then the receipt, then the red neck cloth. He hesitated over the torch before setting it on top where he could reach it in the morning.

The green shoes he left by the trunk, lined up neatly, because Vaelis had apparently entered his mind and begun judging corners from within.

He closed the trunk and locked it.

Then he climbed back into the middle bunk, tucked the key beneath the folded bundle of clothes he was using as a pillow, and settled onto his side.

Folded clothing was not a pillow.

Mabel had been right about that.

Still, it would do.

For one breath, Tobin lay awake listening to the staff house: floorboards creaking, voices murmuring, someone laughing softly below, the far-off clatter of dishes, the road quieting beyond the windows.

Tomorrow, he would decide exactly what to say.

Tomorrow, he would face Chef Emberhand.

Tomorrow, he would learn whether a normal torch could become left-handed through courage, sarcasm, or technicality.

But that was tomorrow.

Tonight, Tobin closed his eyes.

And for the first time since he had seen the Crown Road Waystation rising over the road that morning, no voice inside him told him to run.

End of Story One

The Left-Handed Torch

Return to Hash & Dagger