

The Bookseller's Tale

One of Many Possible Worlds

I was in love with more than just books. My husband and I share a passion for reading, and that common tie bound us together with a passion for each other that made us perfect companions, like matching bookends on an infinite shelf of favorite stories.

Omar and I first met in a library under the glow of coldfire reading lamps, both interested in the same book, and rather than let one of us go home disappointed, we took the volume to a coffee shop and read to each other. We met again and again for days. We enjoyed the activity so much that we decided on another book when we were finished—both of us choosing the same title without any hints from the other.

People tend to view the past through tinted lenses, a halo effect, remembering only the ideals that we wanted to see, but I'm not deluding myself. Omar and I did indeed have a love and a partnership that rivaled anything in a classic romantic novel. We were giddy with each other.

And that is what makes my tale all the more poignant, all the more sad. With our intimate knowledge of literary tropes and the expectations of a story, Omar and I should have been well aware that a great romance requires a *separation*, a loss. No masterpiece follows the storyline of "They fell in love, they remained happy, and lived out the rest of their days in companionable bliss. The end." The quest for the unattainable is a far more compelling story than a simple happily-ever-after.

Fortunately, my story is not yet over, and I am waiting to see how it all ends....

After Omar and I were married, it seemed like the guiding hand of Fate when we discovered a small bookshop for sale. A curious establishment far from any main commercial thoroughfare, it was cluttered and disorganized, filled with countless oddities. The owner had mysteriously vanished, leaving no heir and no instructions.

It was wonderful.

Omar had a good salary as an assistant manager of a gentleman's clothing shop, and the Watchmaker had given us one hundred gold honeybee coins as a congratulatory gift to start our collaborative lives, as he gave to all newlyweds. We counted our coins, stretched our finances, and saw that we could barely afford the purchase, but Omar and I didn't really have to discuss the question. Both of us knew that the shop was destined to be ours. That was as predictable as a plot twist in a clichéd penny-dreadful novel. We dickered with the property agent who represented the sale of the abandoned bookshop and came to an agreement. We signed the deed, and Omar and I became the new proprietors of Underworld Books.

The doors had been locked before our purchase, and the property agent had only allowed us to look around briefly, but now that we owned the shop, we could explore it all, read every volume if we desired. Neither of us cared about the profitability of selling those obscure books—we just wanted to peruse them to our heart's content. That made us lackluster business owners, but well-satisfied readers.

On the first day, I cut an apple into wedges for each of us to eat while we explored our store. We looked at the shelves, the overstuffed chairs where readers could enjoy books the way they were meant to be enjoyed.

Behind the front desk in a back room was a peculiar framed dressing mirror that had no reflecting glass, but rather an opalescent surface like rainbows mixed with pearls. On a small curio table next to the moonstone mirror was a volume showing an etched silhouette of the looking glass and the plain but intriguing words *User's Manual*.

The manual contained complex and incomprehensible

graphs and tables, explanations of dimensional trigonometry, calibration logs, and activation instructions. The mathematical symbols and derivations meant nothing to us, but on the last page, handwritten words—the former bookshop owner’s?—gave advice: “Be careful, but enjoy. There are more stories than one world can contain or produce, but they should be made available to all.”

Neither of us knew what to make of this, but Omar and I followed the activation instructions in the book, the patterns and paths marked on the gold frame, curious to see what would happen. We discovered that although the reflective moonstone film made a very poor reflecting glass, it turned out to be an excellent *doorway*.

With an ease that we did not entirely understand, Omar and I passed through the moonstone mirror—and found ourselves in exactly the same place. But not exactly the same. It was subtly different.

Yes, we were still inside Underworld Books, but I realized that the stacks of books were arranged differently, the smell in the air had a faint tinge of oranges, and I saw a plate on the oak desk with a sliced orange, half-eaten. But Omar and I had been sharing a crisp *apple* before we toyed with the moonstone mirror.

“One of many possible worlds ...” I said. “This makes no sense.”

Omar picked up a book on the table, a new volume that I was sure hadn’t been there a moment ago. He read the title aloud: “*Going Where I Want Instead of Where I Should: My Adventurous Life*, by Hanneke Lakota.” He began to read the first page. “The best place to start an adventure is with a quiet, perfect life ... and someone who realizes that it can’t possibly be enough.”

I looked at the moonstone mirror, next to which was the same *User’s Manual* open to the same page. “Something’s different here.”

Omar closed the book by Hanneke Lakota and took it with him. “Let’s go back to our shop.” He and I both agreed, and we

stepped to the activated mirror, touched the calibration.

Once we passed back through the moonstone, we were in our bookshop again, with the books arranged as I remembered them, and with the sliced apple on a plate, still so fresh it hadn't even begun to turn brown.

Omar held up the Hanneke Lakota book he had brought with him. "We know that other place existed—and there were so many books."

According to the *User's Manual*, the mirror had many settings—infinite settings—with countless places to explore. The slightest change of angle led to a different end point.

We couldn't have been more excited. Not only did we have a full library of books to read in our own shop, we apparently had an infinite number of shops to peruse as well....



Even with the distraction of the moonstone mirror, Omar and I still had to take care of our shop, arrange the shelves, check prices, develop an inventory. As business owners, we had to be open for our customers. We posted our hours of operation, and we served our clientele properly.

But each evening we closed promptly at 5:00 p.m. when all the clocks around the city struck their resonant chimes. We locked the door, drew the windowshades, and Omar and I went exploring through the mirror.

Each time we adjusted the looking-glass frame, we emerged into a similar version of Underworld Books. Each time, the place was empty, as if the legitimate owner had just stepped out—or stepped *away* to somewhere else. Each shop had many of the same books and as well as different ones, altered editions, versions with the same titles but strange stories inside.

We found previously unknown sequels to famous novels. Omar was pleased to discover additional journals from the adventurer Hanneke Lakota, a simple woman from the quiet town of Barrel Arbor who had sailed across the seas, found lost

cities, adventured with pirates, and had done as much as any one life could hold.

Each time we returned to our shop, we brought interesting volumes back with us.

Strangely enough, when we came back to the familiar yet slightly disorienting reality that belonged to us, I felt a strange tingle on my skin, as if someone else had been in *our* bookshop for a time and was now mysteriously gone. Since the store was still new to us, our books were such a clutter, without a full inventory, that we never knew whether any titles were missing....

Underworld Books began to attract a sophisticated clientele, readers who wanted special editions, books that looked the same on the surface, but discriminating readers knew that the words were unlike anything available elsewhere in Albion.

Every bibliophile had heard about a classic insightful study of human psychology, a series of four volumes with the overall title of “Fear”—but the fourth volume had been lost in a fire more than a century ago before its publication, and the other three volumes were released in reverse order. But in one of those alternate bookshops, I discovered the missing fourth volume of “Fear.” I froze, just staring at the cover for a long moment, before snatching it, thrilled to be able to complete the set.

Omar discovered a children’s book with lavish woodcut illustrations, each one hand-painted; the volume itself belonged in an art museum. It was a fairy-tale of good and evil, a battle of the overworld and the underworld, fought by a ferocious black wolf against a snow-white dog.

Our alternate bookshops held so many marvelous secrets that we had little incentive to explore more widely outside the door, but as we adjusted the mirror by greater degrees, tilting the angle more and more, the differences between our worlds became more dramatic.

Once, I finally opened the door of the alternate bookshop and looked out at this parallel Crown City, astonished to