

THE SHOPKEEPER

INTRODUCTION

Hidden in the twisting streets of Arden's Wake, there is an alleyway that only appears when it is meant to. Revealing a place of forgotten relics, forbidden texts, the strange and mysterious. It exists in a very peculiar state. It is neither fully in this world nor entirely out of it. Hanging above the door is an old, weathered, wooden sign with faded golden letters catching the light of a nearby lantern: Curiosities. It is a simple name, perhaps, but the customers who venture inside quickly learn that simplicity is not what it seems.

I am the keeper of this shop and the narrator of its tales. You may call me Aldwyn. I have gone by many names across limitless timelines and realities, though this one has stuck the longest...for now. I am old enough to have forgotten how many winters I have seen, though my bones remind me more often than I would like. My long, white beard is long enough to tuck into my belt. Which, regrettably, I have done more than once by accident. I often lose my glasses and my memory is not what it used to be. Sometimes, I catch myself in mid-thought and have to retrace my steps. Still, the shop and I get along well enough. We have been tied together for longer than I care to recall.

You see, each and every item in this shop carries a story. They tell not just about the past but also about potential destiny. These objects also do not simply wait to be purchased by just anyone... they choose their owners. A cracked mirror that reveals truths long buried. A music box that plays the song of your soul's deepest yearning. An inkwell rumored to give life

to whatever is written in its ink, though at a cost most find too steep. Some offer salvation. Others bring ruin.

It is not my place to judge the choices people make. But instead, I can guide you through the interpretation...or at least try to. That is... if my memory does not fail me. I am a reluctant caretaker of fates, offering the keys to futures that only my customers can unlock. And yet, even though I may be a grumpy old man, I have grown fond of the travelers who step through these doors. Their triumphs. Their failures. Even the echoes of their choices linger long after they have gone, written into the tomes that line the shelves of the Athenaeum. Oh, yes... That is the library this shop is bound to. It holds what feeds my quaint little shop. It exists outside of our reality and time. In the void, you could say. Containing all knowledge across the infinite of time and space and from all possible realities.

On this particular night within the shop, the shelves groaned a bit more than usual beneath the weight of the old tomes and various other trinkets that quietly vibrated with anticipation. The stale air carried its usual blend of scents: sandalwood, candle wax, dust, and... is that garlic?..and asparagus? Those gargoyles outside the door must be snacking again. It always gives them the worst gas that just seeps through the door cracks.

The bell above the door jingled suddenly, announcing a visitor.

In walked a young man. The door shut behind him. His presence was causing a stir and rattle within the shelves, as if everything was whispering about the new arrival. His eyes darted around, uncertain as to what this place is exactly or how he happened across it. The young man was dressed plainly enough. His coat was mended with careful stitches. His boots looked worn from long travels on the road. There was a wonder in his gaze. The kind that belonged to someone searching for something they could not yet name.

"Ah! A customer...Welcome! Come in, come in," I said. "What is it you seek?"

He hesitated to respond for a moment, still looking about the room.

"I...I don't know?" He fumbled with his words. "Not even sure what 'here' is?"

"Few ever do," I replied as I scratched at my beard. "But the shop knows. It always knows."

The young man walked around for a bit, looking at this and that. Most folks do wander around. As he approached, a faint glow started to emanate from a shelf to his left. He looked over at the object. It was a small box made of dark wood, etched with intricate patterns. Although they were worn to the point it was almost too faint to see. He reached for it, his hand trembling ever so slightly.

"That," I muttered, squinting at the object to make sure I remembered right, "is the Lamentor's box. It is said to hold the final words of those who never had the chance to speak them. Or... was it the box that hums lullabies? No, no, it is definitely the first one."

He turned it over in his hands, his expression unreadable. "What's the cost?"

"Not all costs are measured in currency, my boy. Some are paid in ways you cannot yet foresee."

He stood there for a moment, weighing my words. Then, with a resolute nod, he placed the box on the counter. "I'll take it."

As I wrapped the box in soft velvet and handed it to him, I could not help but wonder what path he had set himself upon. Would this item bring him closure? Or would it open wounds he wasn't prepared to face? That was not for me to decide. My role was merely to watch, facilitate, and grumble when the dust on the shelves got the better of me.

As quickly as he had arrived, he was gone. The door closed behind him, sounding another ring from the bell. The shop fell silent again, save for the faint crackle of a candle burning low. "Where did I place my ledger this time?" I mumbled out loud. "Ah, yes! Here it is," while I moved some scattered newspapers to jot down the latest transaction.

Another story begins. Another thread added to the tapestry of fate. Such is what happens in the Curiosities shop. Each visitor, each relic weaves a singular and connected tale. The stories will continue for me to tell their tale to you. The individuals that find their way to my shop, their thoughts, and trials... All are endlessly fascinating, and I do enjoy being nosey. Some are stories of history retold, while others are ever unpredictable because their outcome depends on the customer. Perhaps, one day, you will find yourself here, too. When you do, be sure to listen

carefully. The items have much to say, and their whispers are not easily ignored.