



XIAPHIUS AND TREZZLEPEG

THE PRICE OF KNOWING

An illustrated prequel to A Past With Two Faces

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Before the Bazaar had a smiling master, it had two friends,
one impossible bargain, and a question no one should answer alone.

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Expanded illustrated edition

Chapter One: The Last Merchant



The Bazaar of Wonders had four entrances, seven exits, and one door that could not make up its mind.

Trezzlepeg discovered the undecided door at the end of a road that had not existed the day before. The road had appeared beneath his boots one pale stone at a time, unrolling across a field of silver grass as though the world had finally remembered an appointment it had neglected to keep. There was no village nearby, no smoke on the horizon, and no sensible reason for a road to end in the middle of nowhere.

Trezzlepeg had spent most of his life in places where sensible reasons were in short supply. He followed it.

The door stood upright with no wall around it and no building behind it. Its hinges were on the left whenever he looked directly at them and on the right whenever he glanced away. The wood appeared ancient, though the brass knob was warm and freshly polished. Above it, ghostly letters gathered like breath upon glass.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

Trezzlepeg adjusted the straps of the enormous pack riding between his wings. The pack contained three bottles of bottled thunder, a self-folding tent that had not folded itself in seventeen years, six crates of brass buttons, two coils of rope that disagreed about their proper length, and the final ledger of the Trezzlepeg family trading company.

The ledger was the lightest thing he carried and, by far, the heaviest.

"That is a very personal question for a door," he said.

The letters shimmered, annoyed by his tone, and rearranged themselves.

WELL? WHICH WILL IT BE?

Trezzlepeg planted his fists on his hips. He was short and broad, as all his people had been, with blue skin, pointed ears, clear wings that hummed when he was irritated, and a smile that had once persuaded a king to buy back his own crown. A merchant could survive bad roads, bad weather, bad governments, and occasionally bad planets. What a merchant could not survive was allowing merchandise to control the conversation.

"Before I answer," he said, "I would like to know whether there is a return policy."

NO.

"Warranty?"

NO.

"Complimentary refreshments?"

The letters vanished.

Trezzlepeg nodded. "At last. An honest establishment."

He did not open the door.

For a moment the field was quiet except for the whisper of silver grass against his boots and the faint clink of bottles inside his pack. Somewhere overhead, two moons were setting in opposite directions. He had chosen this world because an astronomer on the previous one had sworn there was an old story about a marketplace that appeared to travelers who had exhausted all reasonable options.

Trezzlepeg had exhausted reasonable options eleven worlds ago.

His people had been merchants before half the stars had names. The first Trezzlepegs had traded rain to deserts, silence to kings, and left-handed spoons to a planet whose inhabitants possessed only right hands and an astonishing capacity for optimism. They did not merely carry goods. They carried news, marriages, recipes, medicines, jokes, treaties, seeds, songs, and stories. A Trezzlepeg caravan could arrive at a dying settlement with six wagons and leave behind an economy.

Then the caravans began shrinking.

Some of his people vanished to plague. Some to wars they had not started but had been unable to avoid. Others settled on friendly worlds and discovered that children simply did not come. He had watched cousins grow old without heirs, watched whole family routes close because there was no one left to walk them. Each year fewer blue wings crossed the trade roads.

Trezzlepeg had searched seventeen worlds for a cure. Every physician had named a price. Every price had been paid. None of the cures had worked.

The last healer had not even pretended.

"Your people are not ill," she had told him. "They are ending."

Trezzlepeg had laughed in her face, because that was what he did when words were too large to fit inside him.

Now there was only him.

The ledger pressed against his back through two layers of leather and one layer of pride. Every page before the final one carried a name. Grandparents. Cousins. Apprentices. Partners. Buyers. Sellers. The last page contained a single line in his own handwriting.

CORNELIUS C. TREZZLEPEG - ROUTE OPEN.

He had not been able to write CLOSED.

He squared his round shoulders and glared at the door.

"To be," he said. "And if you have a complaint about it, put it in writing."

The door opened.

Warm golden light spilled across the silver grass. Beyond the threshold stretched an aisle so long its far end narrowed to a pinprick. Shelves rose on either side, burdened with objects that ticked, glowed, snored, whispered, sighed, giggled, and in one case pleaded repeatedly for cheese. The air smelled of cinnamon,

lamp oil, rain on stone, old paper, and something bright that reminded Trezzlepeg of the instant before lightning struck.

He leaned inside.

"Hello?"

A jar on the nearest shelf whispered, "Don't."

A brass compass whispered, "Do."

A folded parasol hissed, "Cheese."

Trezzepeg stepped through.

The door vanished behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder at blank shelves, then forward again.

"Ah," said a voice. "That usually worries people more than it appears to worry you."

The speaker was a young man in green robes, tall and lean, with dark hair tied at the nape of his neck. Gold designs climbed his sleeves like growing vines. He carried a dusting brush in one hand and a small cage in the other. The cage appeared empty, though something inside it was humming off-key.

Trezzepeg appraised him automatically: good cloth, worn cuffs, ink on two fingers, seven keys at the belt, tired eyes, curious posture. Apprentice, perhaps. Educated. Not wealthy. Dangerous only in the way curious people tended to become dangerous when given access to locked doors.

"I have found," Trezzepeg said, "that doors are much like customers. If one is rude to you, the worst thing you can do is let it know you are surprised."

The young man smiled. "Xiaphius, apprentice keeper of the Bazaar."

He offered his hand.

Trezzepeg took it. "Cornelius C. Trezzepeg, merchant, explorer, negotiator in edible and inedible commodities, and temporarily the complete living population of my species."

Xiaphius's smile faded.

Trezzepeg disliked pity. Pity was a coin with another person's face stamped on both sides. People handed it to you and expected gratitude for the privilege of being reminded that they were not the unfortunate one.

He hurried on before the young man could spend any.

"I am looking for a cure. Or a relic. Or an essence. Or a creature with unusually strong opinions about family planning. I have been told this place sells impossible things."

"It does," Xiaphius said. "But it never sells them cheaply."

"Good. Cheap merchandise is generally expensive in the long run."

The humming in the cage stopped.

A woman's voice spoke from inside it.

"He should leave."

Trezzepeg peered between the bars. "Your empty cage is unfriendly."

"It is not empty," Xiaphius said, adjusting his grip. "Oriona is a Shadow. She moves through dreams and takes whatever form a sleeping mind gives her. She dislikes strangers."

"I dislike endings," Oriona replied. "And this one carries an ending on his back."

Trezzepeg's wings went still.

Xiaphius looked embarrassed. "She also has a gift for making introductions memorable. Come. The Master will want to meet you."

"Does the Master always meet customers personally?"

"Only the ones who arrive through impossible doors."

"Ah. Premium service."

They set off through the Bazaar.

The shop was larger inside than geography allowed and behaved as though geography were a provincial custom it had never taken seriously. They crossed a room of bottled essences, where love shone rose-gold and fear writhed like green smoke. They passed shelves of abandoned ambitions folded into paper birds, a rack of umbrellas that rained upward, and a display of bottled apologies, most of which had expired unopened.

Trezzlepeg slowed beside the essences. A small vial labeled HOPE trembled as he passed, then rolled to the edge of its shelf.

Xiaphius caught it before it fell.

"The Bazaar responds to need," he explained.

"Then it has poor manners. Need is private."

"The Bazaar disagrees."

"I have already noticed it has opinions."

They passed cages that held a dragon disguised as a fly, a two-headed bird arguing with itself over which head owned the stomach, and a tiny winged bear whose enormous eyebrows made him look perpetually suspicious.

The bear pressed his nose to the glass.

"That one is Andrus," Xiaphius said. "He is being trained for temporal work."

Trezzlepeg blinked. "He appears to be eating the training materials."

Andrus swallowed a page.

"We are working on that."

"Poor creature. No one should be forced to work with schedules."

For the first time, Xiaphius laughed without reserve. It was a warm sound, unguarded and slightly startled, as though he did not hear himself make it often.

Trezzlepeg decided he liked him.

They reached the library, where every memory that had ever been sold to the Bazaar slept between covers. The shelves rose farther than sight. Red bindings breathed battles. Blue volumes murmured lullabies. A cracked brown book coughed whenever someone said the word winter. Glass cases held memories too dangerous to open: the first lie of a god, the last thought of a tyrant, the sound an ocean made when it realized its moon was gone.

Trezzlepeg kept his eyes forward.

One pale volume whispered a name he had not heard since childhood.

"Cornelius."

His mother's voice.

Not a perfect imitation. Better. It had the soft rasp she had developed after a season trading on a dust world. It had the little lift at the end that meant she was pretending not to worry.

He refused to turn his head.

Xiaphius noticed. He did not ask.

That was when Trezzlepeg decided he might someday trust him.

At the library's far end sat the Master, an ancient woman with copper skin and six delicate hands. Five hands wrote in five ledgers. The sixth pointed at Trezzlepeg before he had taken three steps into the room.

"Your people cannot be restored," she said.

Trezzlepeg's practiced smile remained in place.

Only his wings sagged.

"You have not even examined my credit."

"Your credit is excellent. Your cause is impossible. The Bazaar deals in wonders, not lies."

"Everything is impossible until someone sells the first one."

"A merchant's answer."

"A merchant's life."

The Master studied him with eyes so dark they reflected none of the golden lamps. One hand turned a page. Another closed a ledger. A third reached toward a shelf, and the pale memory-book containing his mother's voice slid backward out of sight.

Trezzlepeg hated her for the mercy of it.

"You crossed seventeen worlds," she said. "You traded your northern route for a physician's promise. Your father's compass for a cure that failed. Your wedding contract for passage through the Glass Republic. You sold the melody of your own childhood name to a healer who knew before accepting it that she could not help you."

Trezzlepeg's smile cracked.

Xiaphius lowered his eyes.

"Do not inventory my grief," Trezzlepeg said.

"Then stop offering it as payment."

The words struck with enough force to make him step back.

The Master closed all five ledgers at once. The sound boomed through the library.

"Your people cannot be restored," she repeated, gentler now. "Yet your tradition need not die. Serve here. Learn the routes between worlds. Keep the bargains honestly. Teach those who come after you what a fair price means. One day the Bazaar may place its keys in your hands, and every traveler who crosses its threshold will know that the last Trezzlepeg remained a merchant to the end."

Trezzlepeg looked toward the shelves, then toward Xiaphius, then back toward the aisle that led to an entrance that no longer existed.

"For how long?"

The Master's six hands folded together.

"Until your service is complete."

Trezzlepeg's eyes narrowed.

It was the sort of answer merchants were trained never to accept.

"Define complete."

"I cannot."

"Will not?"

"Cannot."

"Can I resign?"

"You may attempt it."

"That is not reassuring."

"It was not meant to be."

Beside him, the cage in Xiaphius's hand began humming again. This time the tune was almost a lullaby.

Trezzlepeg turned toward the library shelves. Somewhere beyond them, his mother's memory whispered his name once more. The final family ledger pressed against his back. For seventeen worlds he had carried it as evidence that the Trezzlepegs were not finished, because as long as one merchant remained on the road, the company remained in business.

Perhaps the road had simply changed.

He removed the pack.

The weight left his shoulders so suddenly that his knees almost buckled. Xiaphius reached out, but Trezzlepeg waved him off and set the pack carefully on the floor.

"I have conditions," he said.

The Master raised one eyebrow.

"Naturally."

"I keep my name. I keep my ledger. I reserve the right to criticize your inventory system. I will not sell anything to anyone without knowing the price, even if the Bazaar itself objects. And if that tent ever folds itself, I want witnesses."

One of the Master's mouths almost smiled. Trezzlepeg had not noticed until then that she had only one.

"Accepted."

Trezzepeg drew a breath.

"Where do I sign?"

Behind him, Oriona made a sound like a faraway star breaking.

Xiaphius turned toward the cage. "What is it?"

For several seconds she did not answer.

Then, so quietly that only Xiaphius heard, she said, "The ending moved."

Chapter Two: The Apprentice and the Shadow



The first lesson Trezzlepeg learned about the Bazaar was that nothing stayed where it had been put.

The second was that Xiaphius believed this could be corrected with labels.

"Relics beginning with A through F belong on the eastern shelves," Xiaphius said, fastening a brass plaque to a cabinet. "G through M go beneath the blue lamps. N through S are stored beyond the fountain, and T through Z remain in the western gallery."

Trezzepeg studied a jar labeled ARGUMENT, ONE-SIDED as it sprouted tiny legs and marched west.

"Your system appears to be deserting."

Xiaphius caught the jar and returned it to its place. "The shop responds to need. Objects move toward the people who require them."

The jar immediately began marching again.

"Then why organize anything?"

Xiaphius fixed the plaque with unnecessary firmness. "Because civilization is the art of pretending chaos listens to instructions."

Trezzepeg considered this.

"You should put that on a sign."

"No one reads signs."

"Then civilization is doomed."

That answer was the beginning of their friendship.

The years inside the Bazaar did not pass as they did on ordinary worlds. A customer could spend a week among the shelves and return home before finishing a yawn. Another might enter for five minutes and

discover that three generations had been born in her absence. Seasons existed only in the horticultural aisle, where they were kept in four locked wardrobes and occasionally escaped.

Spring escaped most often.

It was difficult to contain.

Trezzlepeg adapted with the efficiency of a merchant who had slept in deserts, palaces, caves, moving ships, stationary clouds, and once inside the hollow tooth of an enormous sleeping animal. He learned which staircases appreciated compliments and which doors required insults. He learned never to shelve bottled thunder beside preserved silence unless he wanted both to become offended. He learned that the Bazaar's front counter changed height depending on the customer and that its bell rang before dangerous visitors arrived, after wealthy visitors left, and continuously whenever children entered.

Xiaphius taught him the hidden roads.

"This corridor leads to the frost worlds," Xiaphius said during Trezzlepeg's first month.

"It appears to lead into a cupboard."

"At the moment."

"And tomorrow?"

"Possibly a volcano."

"I am beginning to miss roads that merely had bandits."

Trezzlepeg, in return, taught Xiaphius the disciplines of trade.

"Never tell a customer an item is priceless," he said. "Priceless means either worthless or beyond your ability to negotiate. Both are embarrassing."

"What if it genuinely has no price?"

"Then it is not merchandise."

"Everything here is merchandise."

Trezzlepeg stopped walking.

"That," he said, "is exactly the sort of sentence that ought to frighten you."

Xiaphius's expression changed. Not much, but enough.

Trezzlepeg filed the reaction away.

Together they stopped a migrating staircase from nesting in the rafters, convinced a homesick thunderstorm to return to its bottle, and rescued Andrus after the tiny Shadow accidentally erased his own memory of where he had hidden.

That incident required three days, two pieces of string, a mirror that showed only forgotten things, and Trezzlepeg standing in the menagerie shouting, "If anyone has misplaced a bear with wings and unreasonable eyebrows, kindly check your pockets."

They found Andrus asleep in a teapot.

"Temporal work," Trezzlepeg muttered as Xiaphius lifted him out. "I continue to object."

Andrus sneezed yesterday onto his sleeve.

"Noted," Xiaphius said.

Their friendship formed in small, ordinary seams between extraordinary events. Xiaphius preferred bitter tea and forgot it until cold. Trezzlepeg liked card games but cheated only when losing badly enough to preserve everyone's interest. Xiaphius kept lists of questions he could not answer. Trezzlepeg kept lists of answers no one had yet asked him for.

When customers grew difficult, they developed a system.

If Xiaphius tapped two fingers against the counter, Trezzlepeg knew the customer was dangerous.

If Trezzlepeg scratched behind one ear, Xiaphius knew the customer was lying.

If either of them said, "How fascinating," the other prepared to run.

Oriona watched them from dreams.

She never had a body of her own. Shadows were creatures of residue and absence, born where powerful things touched mortal lives and left pieces behind. In waking hours she could inhabit darkness, reflections, cages, and occasionally the polished surface of a spoon. In dreams she became almost real.

When Xiaphius slept, she wore the face of his older sister.

He had never explained what had happened to the sister. Trezzlepeg did not ask. There were some bargains friendship did not require.

When Trezzlepeg dozed, Oriona sometimes appeared as his mother and sometimes as a blue-winged child who could never exist.

The first time she appeared as the child, Trezzlepeg woke with a shout and overturned three baskets of mechanical fruit.

The next night he found her waiting in a dream-market beneath a purple sky.

"Do not use that form again," he said.

The child looked down at tiny blue hands. "Your mind gave it to me."

"My mind contains many things I do not place in the front window."

She became his mother instead.

Trezzepeg's wings snapped open.

"Nor that one."

"Then what should I be?"

He looked away. "Something that belongs to you."

For the first time, Oriona seemed uncertain.

The next time she came, she appeared as a woman shaped from violet mist, with constellations shining beneath translucent skin. Her hair moved as though underwater. Her eyes held no pupils, only tiny drifting stars.

"Better?" she asked.

Trezzepeg swallowed.

"Less cruel."

After that, it became the shape she preferred.

Oriona liked Xiaphius because he listened to warnings and then argued with them. She liked Trezzlepeg because he argued first and listened afterward. She trusted neither of them with curiosity.

Curiosity, she insisted, was hunger wearing spectacles.

Xiaphius disagreed.

"Curiosity is the beginning of wisdom."

"So is pain," Oriona said. "That does not mean one should collect it."

Years passed. Or did not. The Bazaar did not answer such questions politely.

Trezzepeg began to think of its golden aisles as home, which frightened him more than most monsters. His family ledger acquired new pages. On them he recorded routes between worlds, unusual customers, honest bargains, dishonest shelves, and names of people who had become important enough to remember.

Xiaphius's name appeared often.

Oriona's did too, though she objected that Shadows could not be entered into a merchant ledger because they possessed no legal weight.

Trezzepeg wrote her in anyway.

"You are terrible at respecting categories," Xiaphius told him.

"I learned from your shelves."

Then came the dream of the lower passage.

It arrived on a night that was only a habit in a place without suns. The blue lamps dimmed. The Bazaar settled into the soft noises of sleeping magic: glass ticking, wings rustling, distant doors muttering to themselves.

Trezzlepeg fell asleep on a stack of flying carpets after spending six hours persuading them not to migrate south. Xiaphius slept in the library with a book open across his chest.

Oriona drew them both into the same dream.

They stood in a black corridor beneath the shop.

Water dripped upward from the floor and vanished into the ceiling. Doors lined the passage, each bearing a warning in a different language. Trezzlepeg could read only three of them.

DO NOT ENTER WHILE REMEMBERING YOURSELF.

NO REFUNDS BEYOND THIS POINT.

KNOCK ONLY IF YOU ARE CERTAIN WHO WILL ANSWER.

"That last one is rude," he said.

Xiaphius was not listening. His attention had fixed on the end of the corridor.

Silver double doors stood there, tall enough for giants. Their surface was engraved with a single sentence:

IF YOU CHOOSE TO MEDDLE WITH TIME, YOU MUST LET TIME MEDDLE WITH YOU.

Trezzlepeg's humor evaporated.

"Where are we?"

"Below the lower vaults," Xiaphius said. "Or somewhere shaped like them."

"A distinction I find less comforting than you apparently do."

Oriona's violet form shivered. "The lower passages are shifting. Something is waking below them."

Xiaphius stepped closer to the doors.

Trezzlepeg caught his sleeve.

"No."

"I was only looking."

"You leaned forward. That is how foolish journeys begin."

"The Master forbade me to enter the Confluence without her."

"Then do not enter."

"I was not going to."

"You are still leaning."

Xiaphius stepped back, offended by how accurately he had been observed.

Oriona raised one misty hand. A second image appeared above her palm: two small golden locket carved like owls. Their gemstone eyes were closed. One held a blue stone, the other a stone the color of old blood.

The metal looked worn, not by age but by touch.

"I have seen these in the dreams of seven customers," she said. "None of them remembers the dream upon waking."

Trezzlepeg's merchant instincts awoke before his caution.

"Are they for sale?"

Xiaphius frowned at him.

"It was a professional question."

The owl eyes opened.

Every door in the corridor began to whisper.

Trezzlepeg heard his family calling from behind them.

Not merely his mother. All of them.

His father complained that the straps on a grain crate were loose. His aunt laughed over a hand of cards. A cousin who had died on a rain world called for him to hurry because the caravan was leaving at dawn. Children he had never met shrieked and ran between wagon wheels. Somewhere, hundreds of wings beat together.

Trezzlepeg took one step toward the nearest door.

Xiaphius heard ten thousand questions answered at once.

He heard the cure to illnesses without names. The location of lost cities. The hidden motives of kings. The endings of wars not yet begun. Every mystery he had ever written on a list opened itself inside his head.

His eyes widened.

Oriona heard nothing at all.

That frightened her more than either sound.

She screamed.

The dream shattered.

Xiaphius awoke in the library with the book split beneath his fingers.

Trezzlepeg tumbled from the stack of flying carpets, flapped twice, struck a shelf, and landed upside down inside a basket labeled WEATHER, MINOR.

A small cloud immediately began raining on him.

"I hate shared dreams," he muttered.

Then he saw Xiaphius's face.

They met in the middle aisle without speaking.

Oriona did not appear. She had vanished into the private darkness where Shadows waited between sleeping minds.

On a table between them sat two golden owl locket.

No one had placed them there.

The stones in their eyes were closed again.

Trezzlepeg stared at them for a long time.

"Professional opinion?" Xiaphius asked.

Trezzlepeg's wings drew tight against his back.

"Not for sale."

Chapter Three: Two Owls



The Master ordered the lockets sealed in Forbidden Antiquities.

She used all six hands to bind the cabinet: iron around gold, silence around iron, and a promise around silence. The final layer was invisible, but Trezzlepeg felt it settle over the wood like pressure before a storm.

Then the Master gave Xiaphius the key.

He stared at the small piece of black metal in his palm.

"Why me?"

"Because you want to use them," she said. "A lock is safest in the keeping of one who understands why it must remain locked."

Trezlepeg cleared his throat.

"With respect, that is either very wise or remarkably foolish."

"The two are neighbors," said the Master. "Only time tells which door one has entered."

"I dislike sayings that become more alarming after I understand them."

The Master ignored him.

Her attention remained on Xiaphius. "The owls do not answer questions. Remember that."

Xiaphius frowned. "We heard answers."

"You heard what answers feel like. That is different."

"What are they?"

"A temptation to believe that knowledge and wisdom are the same thing."

"That is not what I asked."

"It is what I answered."

Trezzlepeg looked between them.

"I see where he learned it."

For a long while, Xiaphius kept the key.

He wore it beneath his robes. Trezzlepeg knew this because every few days Xiaphius touched the place where it hung, especially when a customer asked a question they could not answer.

The Bazaar supplied many such questions.

A queen came seeking the true name of the ocean that had swallowed her fleet. A boy asked whether his father had died bravely. A scholar wanted to know which of his memories had been purchased from someone else. A murderer offered forty years of life in exchange for the location of a witness.

Xiaphius did not use the key.

Each time, Trezzlepeg noticed.

Each time, he respected him more.

Then a customer arrived carrying a dying sun in a wooden box.

She was a girl no taller than the main counter, wrapped in a cloak powdered with frost. Her hair was white from cold, though her face was young. She set the box down with both hands and kept them there, as if letting go might allow whatever remained inside to disappear.

The wood had been charred from within. Red light leaked weakly through the seams.

"Please," she said.

The word carried no bargaining strategy. No prepared speech. It was the sound of someone who had used every better word first.

Xiaphius came around the counter.

"What happened?"

"Our world built its cities beneath a small red star," the girl said. Her breath fogged the air. "It has always been weak, but it has always been ours. Three months ago the light began failing. Then the heat. The astronomers found something black inside the heart. They could not remove it."

She opened the box.

Trezzlepeg had seen suns from a distance, as sensible people generally did. He had never seen one small enough to hold.

It rested inside a nest of black crystal, no larger than a melon. Its surface glowed dull red beneath spreading patches of brown. Tiny flares rose and died along its edge like exhausted hands.

Frost crept across the counter.

"How did you bring it here?" Xiaphius asked.

"I did not bring the whole star. Only its living spark. Our priests divided its heart from its body. If the spark dies, the rest follows."

"How long?"

The girl looked at the frost.

"I don't know."

Trezzlepeg knew that answer. It was the shape of every ending before people admitted it had arrived.

"I can pay," she said quickly.

From beneath her cloak she removed a glass marble. Inside it, an entire summer afternoon glowed: green fields, warm wind, a father's laugh. The scent of grass drifted into the cold room.

"It is my best memory."

Trezzlepeg put one finger on the marble and gently pushed it back toward her.

"Keep it."

Her eyes filled.

"But the Bazaar requires a price."

"It does. I have not yet said the price is yours to pay."

"Cornelius," Xiaphius warned.

"I know the rules. I also know rules written by merchants generally contain loopholes written by better merchants."

The Master appeared at the end of the aisle.

For one heartbeat Trezzlepeg thought she would object.

Instead, one of her six hands made a small motion that might have been permission.

They searched the Library.

Xiaphius read books of stellar medicine until the words swam. He climbed ladders that extended into artificial night, shouted questions at sleeping indexes, and sent three reference volumes to argue with each other in a corner until one admitted it had been miscatalogued.

Trezzepeg questioned creatures that nested in solar flame. A phoenix refused to help unless addressed by its complete ceremonial title. A salamander offered seven cures, all of which required ingredients that had ceased to exist. A small coal-black dragon recommended feeding the star a competing star and seemed hurt when Trezzlepeg rejected the proposal on ethical grounds.

Oriona slipped into the girl's exhausted sleep and searched every lesson she had ever learned.

The girl dreamed of red cities under a red sky. She dreamed of her father teaching her to whistle with two fingers. She dreamed of frost forming on the inside of bedroom windows. She dreamed of a world gathering in dark streets to watch its sun go out.

Oriona came back pale, even for a creature made of starlight.

"Nothing."

They kept searching.

Hours passed, though time in the Bazaar made the claim suspicious.

The little sun dimmed from red to brown.

Xiaphius felt the key beneath his robes.

Trezzepeg saw him do it.

"No."

Xiaphius did not answer.

The girl had fallen asleep sitting on the floor beside the box, wrapped around her summer memory as though it were a coal she could warm herself against.

Oriona appeared in the reflection of a glass case.

"No," she whispered from the girl's dream.

Trezzepeg stepped between Xiaphius and the aisle leading to Forbidden Antiquities.

"The Master trusted you."

"She trusted me to understand the lock."

"Understanding a lock is not permission to open it."

"And understanding a dying child is not permission to let her world freeze."

Trezzepeg's wings stiffened.

"Do not make this about courage."

"I am not."

"Then make it about price. We do not know what those things cost."

The star gave a weak pulse.

Frost spread across the box and climbed over the girl's sleeve.

She shivered in her sleep.

Xiaphius looked at her. He looked at the marble in her hands, where summer still glowed. Then he looked at Trezzlepeg.

"If the Bazaar had possessed a cure for your people," he said, "and the Master had locked it away because she feared its price, would you have left it there?"

Trezzepeg did not answer.

He hated Xiaphius for asking.

He hated himself more because he knew the answer.

Xiaphius crossed the shop.

Trezzepeg followed.

"I am coming with you."

"To stop me?"

"To keep the accounting honest."

The promise around the cabinet awakened as Xiaphius inserted the key.

ARE YOU CERTAIN?

The words did not appear anywhere. They sounded inside the bones.

Xiaphius closed his eyes.

"No."

The lock clicked.

The cabinet opened anyway.

The owl lockets lay on black velvet. Their gemstone eyes opened together.

Trezzepeg took an involuntary step back.

"That is a bad sign."

"Most signs are," Xiaphius said.

The lockets were cold against his palms.

When he fastened the first chain around his neck, he heard a voice like pages turning.

Ask.

His breath caught.

He put on the second.

The Bazaar disappeared.

There was no flash, no explosion, no sense of movement. One moment Xiaphius stood inside Forbidden Antiquities. The next he stood in the life of the star.

He saw its beginning: gas folding into fire, fire learning its own weight. He felt the pressure of its first ignition and the joy of a world below when the new light rose. He saw cities built beneath it, generations born, songs written to its color.

Then he saw the poison.

A dark mineral mined from the heart of a dead world. A substance that remembered extinction and taught anything it touched to stop becoming.

He saw the accident that released it. The panicked attempts to remove it. Every failed cure.

Then the lockets showed him every cure no one had thought to attempt.

Knowledge filled Xiaphius until his bones seemed made of light.

The sensation was not pain.

Pain would have been easier.

It was certainty.

Every question in the universe seemed one thought away from surrender.

He could have asked why the Master had chosen him. He could have asked what Trezzepeg dreamed about when Oriona was not there. He could have asked what waited below the Confluence doors.

The lockets seemed to feel the shape of those questions forming.

Ask.

Xiaphius tore himself back to the room.

The girl. The star. Only those.

He lifted the dying sun from its box.

"Three grains of joy," he said. "A thread from a phoenix feather. One drop of water taken from a fountain that has never reflected a lie."

Trezzlepeg stared at him.

"We have two of those things."

"Then we improvise the truth."

"That is a sentence I expect to regret."

They worked together.

Trezzlepeg measured the joy essence with a merchant's exactness. Too much joy, according to the label, caused irrational dancing and occasionally revolution. Oriona entered the sun's feverish dream and kept its failing flame calm. Xiaphius plucked a single thread from the phoenix feather while the offended bird shouted legal threats from three rooms away.

The fountain was the problem.

Every fountain in the Bazaar had reflected a lie at some point. The Bazaar was full of customers.

Trezzlepeg solved it.

He carried an empty silver bowl into the room of unfinished things, set it beneath a pipe that had not yet decided whether it was a fountain, and waited.

One drop fell.

"Never reflected anything," he said. "Technical compliance."

Xiaphius grinned despite the lockets whispering against his chest.

They combined the ingredients.

Xiaphius wove them into a lattice of golden light and pressed it into the dark mineral inside the star.

For one terrible second nothing happened.

Then the little star blazed.

Its radiance flooded the room, warm and red and alive. Frost vanished from the counter. Ice fell from the girl's cloak in glittering sheets.

She woke.

When she saw the light, she laughed once, fiercely, and hugged the box to her chest.

Trezzlepeg turned away until he could trust his face.

"What do I owe you?" the girl asked.

Xiaphius removed the lockets.

The vast chorus of answers fell silent.

The silence hurt.

He had not realized how quickly certainty could become an addiction until it was gone.

"A promise," he said.

Trezzlepeg looked at him sharply. Promises were valid currency in the Bazaar.

Xiaphius continued. "When someone asks whether impossible things can be saved, tell them yes. Tell them the price is never what they expect."

The girl's eyes narrowed with solemn concentration.

"I promise."

Somewhere deep in the Bazaar, a ledger wrote the words down.

After she left, Trezzlepeg found Xiaphius alone beside the cabinet.

The lockets lay inside. The door remained open.

"Close it," Trezzlepeg said.

Xiaphius did not move.

"You did a good thing," Trezzlepeg added.

"I broke my word."

"Both statements may be true. Annoying, isn't it?"

Xiaphius almost smiled.

"You would have done it."

Trezzlepeg folded his arms. "Do not ask questions when you already know the answer."

The words hung between them.

Xiaphius looked at the lockets.

For an instant, Trezzlepeg thought he saw their golden eyes open.

Then Xiaphius shut the cabinet.

The promise sealed itself again.

From the dark glass of the door, Xiaphius's reflection looked back at him.

For an instant, it had two faces.

One looked relieved.

The other smiled.

Chapter Four: The Master of Answers



Secrets are difficult to keep in a shop that sells memories.

Word spread.

It did not spread in a straight line. Nothing in the Bazaar did. A sailor carried the story of the rescued sun to a moon where news traveled in songs. A diplomat bought one of those songs, changed three details to make it more impressive, and sold it to a prince. The prince's barber told a clockmaker. The clockmaker's clock told everyone.

Soon travelers came asking for Xiaphius, the apprentice who could read unborn languages, cure impossible illnesses, and answer riddles before they were asked.

The first few times, he refused.

"The lockets are forbidden," he said.

Trezzlepeg approved.

Then a woman arrived carrying a city in a bottle. A plague had trapped the inhabitants inside one repeating hour. Xiaphius searched every permitted book and every forbidden book the Master would allow. Nothing helped.

He used the lockets.

The city escaped its hour.

Months later, two moons prepared for war because each claimed ownership of an eclipse. Xiaphius used the lockets to discover that neither moon had caused it.

A year later, he found the lost name of a nameless prince, and the prince remembered who he had been. Then he exposed a thief who hid stolen years inside clocks.

Each answer increased the Bazaar's fame.

Each triumph made the next use easier to justify.

Xiaphius wore the owl lockets only when absolutely necessary.

At first, absolutely necessary meant once a year.

Then once a month.

Then whenever the Bazaar bell rang.

The Master objected rarely and watched constantly.

Trezzlepeg noticed because merchants noticed the things people tried to disguise as ordinary behavior.

"You should stop him," he told her one evening.

The Master was sorting contracts with all six hands. "You believe I have not tried?"

"I believe you gave him the key."

"And he chose to use it."

"Convenient division of responsibility."

Two of the Master's hands stopped.

"You are angry with me."

"I am a merchant. I am angry with unclear terms."

"There is nothing unclear about the terms."

"Then tell me the price."

The Master looked toward the upper galleries, where Xiaphius was answering a delegation of glass-bodied scholars.

"I do not know it."

Trezzlepeg's wings twitched.

"Then why permit the sale?"

"Because the lockets are not being sold."

"Everything here is merchandise."

She looked at him.

Trezzlepeg remembered Xiaphius saying the same thing years before.

The words sounded worse now.

Trezzlepeg kept the accounts. The prices were always fair. The profits were extraordinary.

He should have been pleased.

He was not.

Customers began offering too much for answers. A king offered his firstborn's happiest year to learn the result of a battle not yet fought. A scholar offered the memory of her mother's face to know whether her life's work would be remembered. A frightened man offered one of his names to learn whether his wife still loved him.

Trezzlepeg refused them all.

"You are not buying certainty," he told the scholar. "You are buying one future and pretending it has already happened."

"Xiaphius can see it."

"Xiaphius can see possibilities."

"He said it was likely."

"Likely is a respectable word. Certainty is a thief wearing likely's coat."

The scholar left angry.

Trezzlepeg entered the transaction in the ledger as NO SALE.

That night he found Xiaphius awake at the stage between night and morning, sitting alone beneath the blue lamps. The lockets lay cupped in his hands. His lips moved in furious conversation.

Trezzlepeg approached quietly.

"With whom are you bargaining?"

Xiaphius snapped the lockets shut in his fist.

"No one."

Trezzlepeg glanced at the dark shelves.

"No one appears to be winning."

Xiaphius rubbed one temple. Shadows bruised the skin beneath his eyes. "They show possibilities. Paths not taken. Calamities not yet born. If I can see them soon enough, perhaps I can prevent them."

"Or perhaps seeing them is what creates them."

"That is superstition."

"So is walking beneath ladders. Yet in this shop the ladders bite."

Xiaphius rose too quickly. The room tilted around him, and he caught the edge of the table.

Trezzlepeg's irritation vanished.

"Sit down."

"I am fine."

"That was not a diagnosis. It was an instruction."

Xiaphius pulled away.

"You do not understand what I carry."

The sentence landed harder than he intended.

Trezzlepeg's hand slowly fell.

"Then explain it."

Xiaphius looked at him.

For an instant he wanted to.

He wanted to say that the lockets never truly went silent anymore. He wanted to confess that sometimes he knew which customer would walk through a door three seconds before the bell rang, even when the owls were locked away. He wanted to admit that he had started dreaming answers to questions he had not asked.

But the lockets warmed in his hand.

He envies you.

The voice sounded like his own thought.

Xiaphius flinched.

Trezzlepeg heard only metal scraping softly against metal. He mistook the flinch for contempt.

"Cannot, or will not?" he asked.

Xiaphius said nothing.

Trezzlepeg's wings stiffened.

"Very well. Keep your wisdom. I have shelves to dust."

He turned away before Xiaphius could answer.

The lockets whispered.

He fears what you are becoming because he cannot become it.

Xiaphius squeezed them until the edges cut his palm.

"Be quiet."

Trezzlepeg stopped at the end of the aisle.

"I said nothing."

"I know."

That frightened them both.

Oriona waited in Xiaphius's next dream.

Her violet form was ragged at the edges. Stars flickered beneath her skin and occasionally went dark.

They stood on the roof of a city that changed every time Xiaphius blinked. In one version it flourished. In another it burned. In a third it had never been built.

"They are learning you," Oriona said.

"They are objects."

"So is a key. A key can still change the fate of a prisoner."

"I have saved worlds with them."

"And every time you open them, something looks out."

Xiaphius turned away.

"You sound like Trezzlepeg."

"He sounds like me. I am older."

"You are impossible."

"That is why I live here."

The dream changed.

A canyon appeared beneath a full moon. Two young men raced iron machines along its edge, engines roaring through night air. One wore a gold mask. The other shouted something Xiaphius could not hear.

A brilliant light swallowed one rider.

The vision turned.

A warrior in golden armor raised a burning phoenix on his arm. Behind him, a city disappeared into yellow mist. His face was hidden, yet Xiaphius felt rage coming from him like heat from a furnace.

The vision turned again.

A man with one face wore another.

A brother died, lived, and died differently.

A woman stood between two histories and wept because both belonged to her.

A tiny winged bear plucked a jewel from his own forehead and screamed.

A blue merchant sat upon the Master's chair and laughed with eyes that did not laugh.

Xiaphius stepped backward.

"Are these futures?"

"They may be warnings."

"How do I stop them?"

Oriona reached for him.

"Begin by not asking the lockets."

The dream shattered before he could answer.

Xiaphius awoke with both hands wrapped around the owl chains.

They were not locked in the cabinet.

They were around his neck.

He did not remember putting them on.

The Master died the following day.

There was no battle. No prophecy. No dramatic final bargain. She simply sat at her desk after closing and failed to rise.

Her six hands went still over six unfinished ledgers.

Trezzlepeg found her first.

For a long moment he stood in the doorway, unwilling to step into a room where death had made the final offer. Then he walked forward and closed each ledger one by one.

Xiaphius arrived behind him.

The lockets were hidden beneath his robes.

The Master opened her eyes once.

Perhaps she had not died yet.

Perhaps the Bazaar allowed its masters one final moment after death to finish unpleasant business.

One hand lifted and caught Xiaphius's wrist.

"Answers," she whispered, "are doors."

He leaned close. "Master?"

"Do not mistake opening for arriving."

Her fingers relaxed.

This time she did not move again.

By the laws of the Bazaar, the keys passed to the apprentice who had brought the shop its greatest renown.

Xiaphius became Master.

Trezzlepeg organized the ceremony.

He polished the keys, balanced the ledgers, bribed three chandeliers into staying lit, and prevented the season of autumn from escaping its wardrobe during the oath. He stood at his friend's side while customers, creatures, Shadows, relics, and one opinionated staircase watched.

When Xiaphius took the Master's chair, Trezzlepeg's pride hurt almost as much as his fear.

He remembered the young man with the dusting brush and empty cage.

He remembered cold tea, migrating carpets, and the first time they had laughed together.

He wanted to believe the chair did not change the person sitting in it.

Then the golden keys locked themselves around Xiaphius's waist.

The owl lockets shifted beneath his robes.

And Xiaphius's shadow on the wall bowed in a different direction.

Chapter Five: The Things Beneath the Shop



Being Master gave Xiaphius authority over every door in the Bazaar except the ones that mattered. The lower passages continued to shift.

Shelves returned with claw marks. Memory-books woke screaming. Customers dreamed of a pair of open owl eyes. A corridor leading to the menagerie vanished for three days and came back smelling of smoke from a century that had not happened yet.

Xiaphius ordered the deepest galleries sealed.

Trezzlepeg objected.

"There is merchandise below. Some of it has already been paid for."

"Then refund the customers."

Trezzlepeg stared at him over the main ledger.

"With what? Their payments have been catalogued, divided, and in two cases planted."

"Use your judgment."

Trezzlepeg's mouth tightened.

"You used to value it."

The words struck harder than he intended.

Xiaphius looked suddenly old, though his hair was still dark. Sleeplessness had sharpened his face. The green and gold robes of the Master fit him perfectly and looked wrong for that very reason.

"I value it now," he said. "That is why I need you here."

"Here," Trezzlepeg repeated. "Always here."

The Bazaar went very quiet around them.

Trezzlepeg had served longer than the old Master's bargain should reasonably have required. He had not counted the years because counting them was impossible, but he had counted departures.

Seven thousand, four hundred and twelve customers had entered after him and successfully left. He had tried as well.

The first attempt had been casual. He followed a customer through the silver door and found himself coming back through the same doorway from the opposite side.

The second had involved a portal hidden in a wardrobe. It deposited him beneath the main counter with a hatbox on his head.

The third had used a window that opened onto yesterday. He climbed through, spent two hours in the previous day, and discovered that both versions of himself were still trapped inside the shop.

After that, he stopped experimenting alone.

Xiaphius knew.

He had promised to find a way to free him.

At first the promise came with plans. Then theories. Then apologies.

Lately, every promise had been followed by silence.

"I am close," Xiaphius said.

Trezzlepeg laughed once.

"You say that whenever you wish me to stop asking."

"The lockets contain the answer."

"The lockets contain many answers. That does not make them honest."

"You think I do not know that?"

"I think you know it in the same way a gambler knows the odds. Clearly, accurately, and without allowing them to interfere."

Xiaphius's eyes flashed.

For a moment, the Master of the Bazaar stood across the counter from the last Trezzlepeg.

Then both of them saw the same memory: two friends in this exact place years earlier, shoulder to shoulder, laughing because a jar of one-sided arguments had escaped again.

The anger bent but did not break.

"I am trying to save you," Xiaphius said quietly.

Trezzlepeg's wings lowered.

"Then speak to me as though I am worth saving."

Xiaphius opened his mouth.

A bell rang from the lower passage.

It was not the bright chime that announced a customer. It was a slow iron note used only when a sealed door opened itself.

Once.

Twice.

On the third toll, every lamp in the Bazaar turned blue.

Xiaphius reached for the owl chains.

Trezzlepeg caught his wrist.

"No."

The Master of the Bazaar could have ordered him aside.

The old friend beneath the robes did not.

"Come with me," Xiaphius said.

Trezzlepeg released him.

"I was going to anyway. Someone has to prevent you from learning anything."

They took a flying carpet into the depths.

The carpet objected to descending and required three threats and one compliment before cooperating. Oriona followed through patches of dream clinging to the walls, her violet outline appearing in mirrors, puddles, polished brass, and once in the eye of a sleeping stone lion.

They sped past the Relics vault, beneath the menagerie, and into corridors the shop had not remembered in centuries.

The farther they traveled, the less complete the world became.

One stair had no final step.

A doorway opened into the sound of rain but no rain.

A room contained only the smell of bread from a home none of them had lived in.

A mirror showed Trezzlepeg as a king, Xiaphius as a prisoner, and Oriona with a living face.

Trezzepeg stopped before it.

In the reflection, he sat on a blue throne surrounded by members of his species. Hundreds of them. Children darted among market stalls. A woman with his mother's eyes argued cheerfully with a customer over the price of cloth.

He reached out.

Xiaphius slapped his hand away from the glass.

The reflection cracked.

For an instant the blue-winged crowd behind King Trezzlepeg became skeletons.

Then the mirror went dark.

"Thank you," Trezzlepeg said.

"You would have done the same."

"I have done the same. Repeatedly. That is why I am tired."

Xiaphius looked away.

They descended farther.

At last the corridor ended at the Confluence of Time.

The silver doors towered above them.

Trezzepeg remembered them from Oriona's shared dream. In waking life they were worse. The metal was not silver at all. It only reflected whatever age the viewer feared most. Trezzlepeg saw his own blue hands wrinkled and trembling. Xiaphius saw his hands covered in someone else's blood.

The warning engraved across the doors had changed.

IF YOU CHOOSE TO MEDDLE WITH TIME, TIME WILL REMEMBER.

Trezzepeg read it twice.

"I preferred the first version."

"So did I."

One door stood slightly open.

Warm light spilled through the gap.

Trezzepeg smelled dust, leather, spice, and rain.

His heart stopped.

Through the opening lay the silver field where he had first found the Bazaar.

His old pack waited in the grass.

Beyond it flew a whole caravan of blue-winged merchants.

His people.

Not memories. Not dream-shapes. They cast shadows. Their wings caught moonlight. Wagon bells rang across the field.

His mother stood at their head.

She looked exactly as she had the last year of Trezzlepeg's childhood, before illness thinned her face and grief bent her shoulders.

"Cornelius," she called.

His full name, spoken the way no one else had ever spoken it.

Trezzepeg stepped off the carpet.

"Mother?"

She smiled.

Behind her, children lifted blue faces. Merchants waved. Someone called that the route was open.

Trezzepeg took another step.

Xiaphius seized the back of his robe.

Trezzepeg struck at his hand.

"Let me go!"

"Look again."

"I said let me go!"

Xiaphius pulled with both arms.

The vision changed.

The caravan became rows of empty cages.

The silver grass blackened.

Trezzepeg's mother opened her mouth, and a voice older than either of them laughed through it.

The sound came from beneath the world.

Xiaphius dragged Trezzepeg backward as the doors slammed.

The impact threw all three of them to the floor.

Trezzepeg lay against Xiaphius's chest, shaking.

For several seconds he could not breathe.

"It knew," he whispered. "It knew what I wanted."

Xiaphius did not loosen his grip.

"The Confluence shows the past we wish to change. It feeds on regret."

Trezzepeg went still.

"How do you know?"

Xiaphius's hand drifted toward the owl lockets.

The answer was small.

Trezzepeg shoved him away.

"Of course."

"Cornelius-"

"Do not."

"I had to know what we were facing."

"You always have to know."

"Someone does."

"No. Someone has to decide when knowing costs too much."

The words echoed through the unfinished corridor.

Xiaphius stared at him.

Trezzepeg stood, climbed onto the carpet, and kicked it into motion.

"Trezzepeg."

He did not look back.

Oriona remained with Xiaphius.

Her violet outline flickered.

"Go after him," she said.

Xiaphius looked at the sealed silver doors.

"I need to understand this first."

Oriona's face filled with sorrow.

"That is what you always say before you lose something."

Neither friend noticed the mirror behind them.

In its black surface, two golden eyes opened.

Chapter Six: A Question With Two Answers



Oriona found Xiaphius wandering a dream that did not belong to him.

He stood in an Earth theater.

He knew the world only from customers and books. Earth was a young place by the Bazaar's standards, noisy and inventive, full of people who mistook the limits of their experience for the limits of creation. The theater smelled of dust, velvet, old wood, and electricity.

Empty seats rose into darkness.

Onstage hung two golden masks: one laughing, one grieving.

Xiaphius approached them.

The masks looked ordinary from a distance, theatrical ornaments polished to catch stage light. Up close, he saw tiny owl feathers carved along their edges.

When he touched them, they became locket in his hands.

Xiaphius recoiled.

"This is not one of my dreams."

"No," Orion replied.

She stood at the center aisle, dimmer than he had ever seen her. The constellations beneath her skin no longer formed familiar shapes.

"It belongs to someone who has not been born yet."

A motorcycle engine roared beyond the curtains.

The sound was followed by laughter, a shouted warning, and the hard metallic cry of something striking stone.

Xiaphius moved toward the stage wings.

Oriona caught his arm.

"Do not follow it."

"Who is dreaming?"

"You are still asking the wrong question."

He stared at the golden masks.

"The owl lockets are using you to reach other minds," Oriona said. "Not merely across worlds. Across years. Soon they will not need you at all."

The theater lights went out one row at a time.

In the darkness, two owl eyes opened above the stage.

Xiaphius finally understood what fear had been trying to tell him for years.

He had believed he was using the lockets because he could remove them.

He had believed he controlled the questions because the answers arrived in his own thoughts.

He had believed temptation remained temptation so long as he occasionally resisted it.

The lockets had been patient.

"Then help me destroy them," he said.

Oriona's face softened.

"At last, the right question."

They devised a plan.

The Bazaar could not destroy an object whose bargain remained unfinished. Every relic inside the shop existed because someone, somewhere, had paid a price or promised one. The owl lockets had no recorded seller, no recorded buyer, and no completed transaction. Until the bargain behind them ended, the Bazaar would preserve them even against its own Master.

But it could scatter an object beyond ordinary reach.

At the lowest chamber, every road in the Bazaar crossed. A thing cast into that crossing might fall into any world, any age, any history. It might arrive as itself. It might change shape. It might divide. It might wait centuries before anyone found it.

"Or it might return tomorrow," Xiaphius said.

"Every plan has a rude possibility," Oriona replied.

Xiaphius would carry the lockets into the chamber. Oriona would enter their dreaming intelligence and hold their attention. Trezzlepeg would seal the passage from above if the chamber destabilized.

There was one difficulty.

They had to tell Trezzlepeg.

They found him at the main counter, filling the old Master's ledgers.

He wrote with four pens at once, two held in his hands and one in each wingtip. That had once been a joke. Now it was the only way he kept up with the work Xiaphius no longer noticed needed doing.

A line of customers stretched into the eastern aisle.

Trezzlepeg finished three entries, settled a dispute between a woman and a box that claimed it had already been purchased, and sent a floating invoice after a departing giant before acknowledging Xiaphius.

"Master," he said.

The title was courteous.

The courtesy hurt.

"Can we speak privately?"

"We have no private rooms. The walls sell memories."

"Cornelius."

Trezzlepeg set down one pen.

"What do you need?"

Xiaphius looked at the long line of customers.

Trezzlepeg sighed and raised one wing.

"Counter, hold."

The counter stretched upward and developed a brass sign reading TEMPORARILY INCONVENIENT.

The waiting customers groaned.

"You see?" Trezzlepeg said. "Even the furniture has learned management."

Xiaphius almost smiled.

Then the owl chains moved against his chest.

He felt them notice Trezzlepeg.

"I need you to manage the Bazaar while I go below."

Trezzlepeg's expression closed.

"How long?"

"I do not know."

One pen snapped between Trezzlepeg's fingers.

"You promised to free me."

"I have not forgotten."

"No. You merely found other matters more interesting."

"That is not fair."

Trezzlepeg laughed quietly.

"Fair? You would like to discuss fair? I have spent lifetimes balancing prices in a shop that refuses to tell me the terms of my own bargain. Every road I take returns me here. Every year you tell me you are close. Every month the lockets become more important than the promise you made before you wore them."

"I am doing this because of the lockets."

"Everything is because of the lockets."

Xiaphius wanted to tell him everything.

That the lockets had shown Trezzlepeg in chains.

That he had searched hundreds of possible paths to freedom and watched the Bazaar collapse in some, Trezzlepeg die in others, and whole timelines twist into worse shapes in the rest.

That every time he looked for an answer, the owls showed him one step more and charged him in fear.

That he was going below partly to save the last friend he had.

But the owl chains burned against his chest.

If he knows, he will stop you, they whispered.

Xiaphius gripped the counter.

If he knows, he will take us.

"Stop," he said under his breath.

Trezzlepeg's eyes narrowed. "I have said nothing."

He wants what you possess. Everyone does.

Xiaphius felt the words jam in his throat.

Oriona appeared faintly in the polished counter between them.

"Tell him," she urged.

Trezzlepeg could not hear her.

Xiaphius tried.

"The shop must have a keeper," he managed.

The sentence was wrong the instant it left his mouth.

Trezzlepeg's face went still.

Hurt hardened his eyes until anger was easier to look at.

"And you have found one you cannot dismiss. How convenient."

"Cornelius-"

"Do not call me that as though we are family."

Xiaphius froze.

Trezzlepeg's lower lip trembled once. He covered it with a smile so sharp it could have cut glass.

"I have none."

Silence swallowed the counter.

Even the waiting customers stopped complaining.

Xiaphius reached to his belt.

He removed the ring of Master's keys and placed it between them.

The metal chimed softly.

"If I do not return, they are yours."

Trezzlepeg stared at the keys.

"You said you did not know how long."

"I don't."

"Then say what you mean."

Xiaphius tried.

He tried to say I am afraid.

He tried to say I was wrong.

He tried to say you were the first person in this place who knew me before people began asking for answers.

He tried to say brother.

The lockets tightened like hands around his neck.

His breath failed.

"Keep the customers safe," he whispered.

Trezzlepeg looked at him as though he had chosen the cruelest possible answer.

Perhaps he had.

Xiaphius turned away.

Trezzlepeg's voice followed him across the shop.

"If you walk out now, Xiaphius, do not expect me to spend eternity believing you meant to come back."

Xiaphius stopped.

For one heartbeat, Oriona thought he would return.

His shoulders moved. His hand lifted.

Then the owl eyes opened beneath his robes.

Xiaphius lowered his hand and continued toward the lower passage.

Behind him, Trezzlepeg stared at the keys until his reflection doubled in the metal.

Chapter Seven: The Vanishing

The lower chamber had no shelves, because nothing stored there wished to remain still.

Doors drifted through the air like leaves. Staircases twisted into their own beginnings. Rivers ran upright, vanishing into black ceilings before pouring back from cracks in the floor. A bridge crossed a gap that had not yet decided whether it existed.

At the chamber's center hung a dark sphere full of distant stars.

The crossing.

Every road in the Bazaar touched it eventually. Worlds brushed against one another there. Centuries passed close enough to whisper. A traveler with sufficient skill, sufficient madness, or insufficient supervision could step through the right door and emerge before his own birth.

The old Master had sealed the chamber for good reason.

Xiaphius entered anyway.

The doors behind him folded shut.

Oriona spread herself through his dream until violet light filled the chamber. Her shape became enormous, then thin, then everywhere at once. She appeared in the drifting doors, in the upright rivers, in the polished stones beneath Xiaphius's feet.

"When I touch their minds, cast them into the crossing," she said. "Do not listen to what they offer."

Xiaphius held the owl lockets in both hands.

They were warm now.

Alive was not the right word.

Waiting was.

"What will happen to you?"

Oriona's face appeared beside him in the dark sphere.

"I am a Shadow. We are what remains when power takes something from a soul. Remaining is what I do."

"That is not an answer."

"I learned from you."

For the first time in many nights, Xiaphius laughed.

The sound startled him.

He remembered Trezzlepeg saying that civilization was doomed because no one read signs. He remembered cold tea. He remembered the little sun blazing back to life. He remembered the first door and the blue merchant who had stepped through carrying an entire ending on his back.

He wished he had gone back to the counter.

The wish hurt more than the fear.

"Ready?" Oriona asked.

"No."

"Good."

Xiaphius fastened both lockets around his neck.

The chamber vanished beneath knowledge.

He saw the first Gyem forging powers into gold.

He saw Bearers kneeling while pieces of themselves were bound into relics. He saw some rise stronger and others rise emptier. He saw the moment power learned that people would call a cage a gift if the bars were beautiful enough.

The vision accelerated.

He saw Bearers turn on one another.

He saw a grieving advisor kneeling beside a dying woman while the man's rage rose behind him in the shape of a golden warrior with a phoenix burning on his arm.

He saw two brothers beneath an Earth moon.

He saw a wife offered two histories and a child waiting at the end of one.

He saw a theater, two masks, a motorcycle, blood on stone.

He saw Andrus older, frightened, plucking a jewel from his own forehead.

He saw Oriona scattered through dreams like violet ash.

He saw Trezzlepeg wearing the Master's keys.

Alone.

Xiaphius gasped.

"No."

The lockets whispered in a voice that sounded almost compassionate.

You can prevent it.

The vision changed.

Trezzlepeg walked free beneath a blue sun.

His people filled the sky.

Not memories. Not imitations. Children clung laughing to his arms. His mother stood beside him, older now, proud and alive.

Oriona wore a body of her own. She breathed. She laughed. Sunlight touched skin instead of mist.

The Bazaar was orderly, peaceful, safe. Every object remained on its shelf. Every bargain was fair. Every door opened only where intended.

Xiaphius stood among them.

Older. Smiling.

Forgiven.

Keep us, the lockets whispered.

Ask us.

There is always another path.

Xiaphius reached for them.

His fingers touched warm gold.

Oriona's voice came faintly from inside.

"Every false promise begins with something true."

The blue sun flickered.

Trezzlepeg's laughing face froze.

Behind the caravan, shadows stretched into cages.

Xiaphius closed his eyes.

"I am sorry," he whispered.

He did not know whether he was speaking to Trezzlepeg, Oriona, the old Master, or himself.

He tore the chains from his neck.

The future vanished.

The chamber returned: wild doors, upright rivers, the crossing full of stars.

Oriona screamed as she plunged into the lockets.

The owls screamed back.

The sound shook dust from centuries that had not happened yet.

Xiaphius drew back his arm.

"Now!" Oriona cried.

He threw.

The lockets did not leave his hand.

The chains snapped around his wrist.

The dark sphere opened.

Wind without air tore across the chamber. Doors shot toward the crossing. Staircases unwound. The upright rivers bent into silver arcs.

Instead of flying from his hand, the owl lockets pulled Xiaphius forward.

His boots left the ground.

Oriona screamed his name.

She tried to drag herself free, but the lockets had wrapped her dream around them. Her violet light stretched into ribbons.

Xiaphius struck the floor and clawed at the stone.

His fingers left bright lines across its surface.

The crossing widened.

He saw worlds inside it.

An Earth highway beneath moonlight.

A room where two golden masks lay separated in different boxes.

A city hidden under yellow fog.

A version of the Bazaar with no Trezzlepeg at all.

"No!"

Above, at the main counter, Trezzlepeg heard the alarm.

He looked at the Master's keys.

They lay exactly where Xiaphius had left them.

The shop bell rang once.

The waiting customers watched him.

The counter waited.

The ledgers waited.

For one bitter second, Trezzlepeg almost remained.

Let him go, anger said.

He chose this.

He did not trust you enough to explain.

He left you with a prison and called it responsibility.

Trezzepeg picked up the keys.

Then he saw a small mark scratched into one of them.

Two letters.

C.T.

Xiaphius had engraved his initials there years earlier after Trezzlepeg complained that every key in the Bazaar looked alike.

"If you lose this one," Xiaphius had said, "I will know it is yours."

Trezzepeg closed his fist.

"Idiot."

He snatched the panpipes from beneath the counter and flew.

The lower passages fought him.

A staircase turned upward when he needed down. He blew three sharp notes on the pipes, and it straightened in alarm. A door showed him his mother. He shut it without slowing. A mirror showed him the Bazaar peaceful under his rule.

He shattered it with his shoulder.

"Not buying!"

He reached the lower chamber as Xiaphius lost his grip.

Trezzlepeg launched himself from the final stair.

Their hands met.

The impact nearly pulled Trezzlepeg out of the air. He beat his wings until pain tore through his back and wrapped both hands around Xiaphius's wrist.

Xiaphius hung over the starry crossing.

The lockets circled him like hungry birds, their chains whipping through the wind.

Trezzlepeg's boots skidded across the stone.

"You came back," Xiaphius said.

The words were astonished.

Trezzlepeg bared his teeth.

"You have not paid me enough to leave!"

Xiaphius laughed once.

Then the crossing flared.

For an instant, Trezzlepeg saw Xiaphius split into a dozen possibilities.

An old man in green and gold.

A prisoner behind glass.

A brightly feathered bird with two arguing heads.

A shadow serving a golden warrior.

A stranger on Earth who no longer remembered his own name.

A child.

A corpse.

A man who had never entered the Bazaar.

Trezzlepeg tightened his grip.

"I have you."

The owl chains lashed around Xiaphius's wrist.

His body jerked.

Trezzlepeg's fingers slipped.

"No!"

"Cornelius!"

It was the first time Xiaphius had used the name since the argument.

Trezzlepeg caught two fingers.

The crossing pulled.

Oriona's voice came from everywhere and nowhere.

"Tell him!"

Xiaphius looked up.

Trezzlepeg saw terror in his face, but beneath it something else.

Relief.

"Tell him you did not leave!" Oriona cried.

Xiaphius tried to speak.

The owl chain snapped tight.

His fingers tore free of Trezzlepeg's hand.

"XIAPHIUS!"

Xiaphius fell into the stars.

For one impossible second he did not vanish. He dropped through a thousand doors at once, green robes flashing in futures that opened and shut faster than thought.

Then the lockets vanished after him.

The crossing closed.

Silence struck the chamber.

Trezzlepeg hit the empty floor hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs.

He stared at his hands.

One held a torn piece of green cloth.

The other held nothing.

"Tell whom?" he shouted. "Xiaphius! Tell whom?"

Only Oriona's voice remained, weak and scattered among the drifting doors.

"Dreams," she whispered. "I must hide in the dreams."

Trezzlepeg spun toward every reflection at once.

"Oriona?"

"If they find me, they find the road."

"What road?"

"To him. To them. To all of it."

Her violet light flickered across a mirror and vanished.

"Wait!"

"Tell him..."

"Tell him what?"

But she too was gone.

Trezzlepeg searched.

He searched until time ceased to have meaning.

He opened every door. He sent Andrus through yesterday and a silver-winged Shadow through tomorrow. He examined mirrors, memory-books, cages, clocks, discarded prophecies, unfinished maps, and one extremely uncooperative crystal ball.

He found echoes.

A laugh in a corridor where Xiaphius had never stood.

A green sleeve reflected in a window that opened onto a city on Earth.

A question written in handwriting that might have been his friend's and might have been his own.

He found one green feather.

Or perhaps it only looked green beneath the lamps.

He kept it anyway.

Days passed. Years. Minutes. The Bazaar refused to clarify.

At last, it called him back to the main counter.

Customers were waiting.

Creatures needed feeding.

The essences had begun arguing about shelf space.

Andrus sat on the counter clutching a clock in both paws. He looked at Trezzlepeg with wet black eyes.

Trezzlepeg's anger collapsed.

He picked up the tiny bear.

"I know," he whispered.

The shop must have a keeper.

The Master's keys Xiaphius had left behind floated from Trezzlepeg's pocket.

He grabbed at them.

"No."

The keys circled his waist.

"No, no, no. We have not negotiated this."

They locked themselves into place.

Deep within the shop, ledgers opened.

The final page of the old Master's book filled with ink.

TREZZLEPEG, CORNELIUS C. - SERVICE COMPLETE.

A second line appeared beneath it.

MASTER OF THE BAZAAR - SERVICE BEGINS.

Trezzlepeg stared at the words.

The bargain was complete.

The last merchant became Master of the Bazaar.

And every exit closed.

Epilogue: The First Customer After Midnight

Trezzlepeg sat in the Master's chair and practiced smiling.

He had always possessed an excellent smile.

It had charmed customs officials, soothed dissatisfied monarchs, ended three arguments before breakfast, and sold a case of umbrellas to a civilization that lived underwater.

This smile was different.

It had to hide the fact that he was alone.

The chair was too large.

That was his first official judgment as Master of the Bazaar.

His second was that six-handed people had possessed unfair advantages in record keeping.

His third was that Xiaphius had been a complete idiot.

Trezzlepeg wrote the judgment in a private ledger.

XIAPHIUS - IDIOT. ACCOUNT UNSETTLED.

He underlined it twice.

Then he sat back and listened to the Bazaar breathe.

The shop had changed since taking his keys. Or perhaps he had changed enough to notice what had always been there. Every door tugged faintly at his awareness. Every bargain rang somewhere in his bones. He could feel customers approaching long before the bell sounded, though he refused to call the sensation knowledge.

It was inventory awareness.

Nothing more.

He had moved the owl cabinet deeper into Forbidden Antiquities even though the lockets were gone. He had reinforced the lower passages. He had forbidden Andrus from temporal work until the bear could go one full week without accidentally eating tomorrow.

And he had left Xiaphius's room untouched.

That was not sentiment.

It was evidence preservation.

Trezzlepeg believed this so firmly that he almost convinced himself.

The Bazaar bell rang.

He froze.

It was after midnight by the nearest available clock, though three other clocks disagreed and one maintained that midnight had been abolished.

Trezzlepeg straightened the ledgers, checked that the Forbidden Antiquities door was locked, and took up his panpipes.

Somewhere in the Library, a pale green book trembled.

A violet thread of dream slipped between its pages.

Trezzlepeg did not see it.

Far below, one of the silver doors at the Confluence acquired a hairline crack.

He did not see that either.

Somewhere far beyond the Bazaar, two owl eyes opened in darkness.

And on a small blue world Trezzlepeg had rarely visited, a pair of golden masks waited to be separated.

One would pass from hand to hand.

One would glow beneath a full moon.

Both would remember the question carved above the Bazaar's first door.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

Trezzlepeg heard footsteps in the entrance corridor.

Uneven. Human-sized, perhaps. Frightened.

He adjusted his coat and summoned the smile again.

A figure stumbled into the golden light.

Trezzlepeg spread his arms in welcome.

"You must be in need of serious help," he said brightly. "Otherwise, you wouldn't be here."

His customer stared at him in bewilderment.

"Where am I?"

Trezzlepeg smiled wider.

"Excellent. We will begin with the inexpensive questions."

Behind him, the shop listened.

In the Library, the pale green book trembled again.

For the briefest instant, Trezzlepeg thought he heard a familiar laugh from somewhere between its pages.

He turned.

Nothing moved.

He stood very still.

"Master?" the customer asked.

Trezzlepeg looked back.

The title still hurt.

He tucked that hurt where customers could not see it.

"Trezzepeg," he said. "Cornelius C. Trezzepeg. Merchant, explorer, keeper of impossible merchandise, and currently the complete management staff of the Bazaar of Wonders."

The customer blinked.

Trezzlepeg gestured toward the endless shelves.

"Now. What are you trying to save?"

Far below, time remembered.

THE PAST HAS TWO FACES

The owl lockets have vanished. The Bazaar has a new master. Far away on Earth, two golden masks and one terrible night are waiting to draw an ordinary family into a struggle across memory, identity, and time.

Continue with *A Past With Two Faces*



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