

Chapter 207 - Bargain

Ding

You've been offered a bargain by the god of the Hidden Sanctuary, Zervathi: *Free my vessel from the ancient shackles and receive wondrous rewards.*

Do you wish to accept or refuse the bargain? Be warned that a bargain is a binding pact, and you may suffer punishment for an infraction.

What the fuck?

The whispering presence was back, hovering at the edge of his consciousness. Vast. Overwhelming. Terrifying. His heart drummed in his chest, breath short. The words remained unchanged on the scroll. He wasn't hallucinating, and the Guide expected an answer.

~What are you waiting for?~ A voice rumbled with impatience, echoed and shattered from a far distance. **~I do not extend this honor lightly, elfoid monkey child~**

Excuse me?

The overbearing attitude snapped him out of his stupor. A prismatic filament extended from him to the air in the middle of the chamber where it vanished. Hallowed Intuition was silent, though the skill might not measure up if he was facing a god. Kai put more stock in the Guide to not do anything harmful.

~I shall accept your apology. Now, we may seal this pact.~

Shit, he can read my thoughts.

~Don't test my mercy. I shall forgive these crude words, but the time to accept my offer is not infinite.~

Kai scrunched his brows and reread the notifications. The Guide never put time limits on any decision. He had to figure out what was going on, binding pacts and punishments were quite ominous. *Wondrous rewards* also sounded scummy as heck.

Is he using FOMO tactics?

~What gibberish do you speak, mortal?~

Stop reading my thoughts and get out of my head!

~If you put an end to the screaming in your head, I shall stop listening.~

Kai drew his sword and slashed the filament that must be the origin of the voice. The prismatic tendril looked like it could be severed by a stiff breeze, but the enchanted blade moved through it with no effect.

It's not a physical object.

His mana surged into the runes. At the risk of straining on the enchantments, he mixed every element together and his unattuned essence to increase sharpness. The crystal sword quivered and shimmered half-translucent with Shadow, Water and Earth.

~Wait!~

Kai raised the glowing blade to brush the thread. The entity's panic reassured him of his chances. Either the god was powerless to act, or the Guide was shielding him.

Why should I?

~Why? WHY!~ The voice thundered in his mind, making Kai's vision blur. ***~I'm Zervathi! God and sovereign of the Hidden Sanctuary, beacon amidst the Darkness, shepherd of Truth, bestower of Gifts and guardian deity of the Vasheyr kingdom.~***

Hmm... That's a very impressive resume, forgive me if I don't bow. But this puny mortal still doesn't comprehend why he shouldn't evict you from his mind.

Kai tightened his hands on the hilt, threatening to cut the connection. A pact with unclear requirements and rewards that could be unilaterally enforced wasn't worth the risk. While the chamber was deserted, a guard might walk in at any moment. He wasn't eager to explain the situation either.

~WAIT! This is your unique chance at receiving my blessing, mortals can't even comprehend its true value!~

I've got two blessings, and they weren't so rude or bossy about it. It sounds to me like you're the one who needs something.

It was interesting to meet the alleged god of the Vastaire—that was pronounced Vasheyr. He'd file away every sentence Zervathi uttered for further examination, but he wasn't going to sell his soul for dubious promises of power.

~It appears I underestimated your standing, you must be a prince of these elfoid monkeys.~

We're called humans.

~Humans, I see. Such a quaint name. And tell me humman prince-child, did those blessings grant you an invulnerable vessel? Shelter your dwelling from Darkness?

Grant the sight to discern Truth? Or bestow the arcane secrets of Space? Perhaps I shall look for a more willing mortal!~

Kai bit his cheek. He had no idea what most of that was, but they sounded awfully tempting. You could never have enough blessings or Favor, especially when you were a nameless kid from the archipelago.

What do you need from me?

~A god does not need for anything. It would be the honor of every mortal to provide assistance and gain my gratitude.~

Kai forced his conscious thoughts to be irritatingly polite. Zervathi seemed to only hear the thoughts he consciously stated, and not his background impressions and understanding.

Then why did you send me a bargain?

~Accept or refuse my offer. The shackles sealing my cage are already falling. I may still decide to wait the events out.~

Fine. Then I refuse.

~Hmm... What do you desire to know to accept the task?~

Kai rolled his eyes at the shameless god. What did you ask an immortal entity, an almost unlimited source of knowledge? A hundred days wouldn't be enough to answer all his questions. He had to be practical.

These ruins are full of people, many stronger and more knowledgeable than me. Why did you pick me?

~You were the most promising candidate who possessed the requisite for the assignment. ~

Meaning...?

~The tether is growing faint, I shall advise you to hurry.~ The voice grew fainter and garbled.

Kai would have called bullshit if he couldn't see the prismatic filament unraveling into fine fibers. He paced in tight circles around the chamber, careful not to stretch the connection.

What do you need me to do in exchange for your blessing?

~Free my vessel from the shackles keeping me trapped in the Hidden Sanctuary.~

Sure, let's free a shady god imprisoned for millennia. What could ever go wrong?

~I detect coarse sarcasm in your tone, elfoid monkey child, but Shade is not part of my domain. I mean no harm to you or your hummans, my only desire is to be liberated from my chains. Truth is one of my domains, I cannot lie.~

So you say.

Ding

Zervathi, god of the Hidden Sanctuary, is a shepherd of Truth and as such he cannot lie.

Kai read the words with mouth agape, his brain trying to make sense of what his eyes were seeing. He checked the hanging notifications from all angles. It was legit and was dismissed by his thoughts.

You can manipulate the Guide.

~Order cannot be manipulated, I was granted some leeway as a deity sworn to Order.~
Zervathi's voice unwound into whispers. ***~Our time is running out, human child. Do you have more pernicious qualms about the quest?~***

There were a million things Kai wanted to say, half of them not particularly polite, but the thread had gotten so thin it was invisible in places.

How do I know you're not sending me on an impossible mission?

~What use would I have to see you perish? Reaching out and offering you a bargain already required considerable effort. I'm not fond of waste.~

So... assuming that I believe you, how do I get to this Hidden Sanctuary and free you?

~You need to find the Altar of Covenant on the highest peak. When the shackles have sufficiently weakened, the path shall become clear.~ Zervathi said in a feeble murmur.
~The end of our time is imminent. You must make a decision.~

Kai dried his sweaty palms. When was he going to get another opportunity to bargain with a god—even a shabby one? How much would he regret it if he wasted it? Stupid Fear Of Missing Out.

Okay, I want clear terms for what I need to do and the reward I get. You can't saddle me with some paltry blessing. I also want insurance that you won't harm any humans. And... I want half the payment in advance. Can you... boost my affinity for Space?

Ding

You've been offered a bargain by the god of the Hidden Sanctuary, Zervathi:

Reach the Hidden Sanctuary before the gates fully open and provide Zervathi assistance to escape his shackles. You shall be rewarded with the strongest Blessing of your choosing that Zervathi may bestow.

In exchange for this undertaking, Zervathi shall endeavor to not intentionally harm any human for a hundred years unless first threatened, and provide a minor blessing of Space upon the agreement of the pact.

~Is that of your satisfaction, impertinent human?~ The commanding voice was barely distinguishable, though the snark pierced through.

The prismatic thread snapped into a mist of vanishing color. Kai was ready to curse when he saw the notifications didn't waver. It seemed the connection had only been necessary to communicate and haggle.

Hmm... What do I do now?

Kai raked a hand through his hair. He hadn't expected the god to accept his requests so readily or he would have asked for more. While the task wouldn't be easy, it didn't require drastically changing his plans, and the offer was too tempting to be refused out of hand.

He had only managed to improve his affinities through blessings, and he had run out of great spirits on the archipelago. From what he knew, it would be near impossible to be accepted by the god of a different pantheon.

Zervathi must have been trapped in the Hidden Realm since the Vastaire fell eight thousand years ago and was desperate to get free. That amount of time would exasperate even a divine entity.

Spirits help me. Give me a sign, what's the best decision?

Kai looked around the empty chamber. No answer came. Yatei and Kahali showed no sign they opposed the bargain.

With a simple yes, he could boost his affinity for Space magic—the rarest element he possessed. And that was only the appetizer, he'd get an even better blessing when he completed the mission. That would set him apart from the snooty brats of the continent.

Calm down. Don't get blinded by the shiny priceless trinkets you may never get another chance to gain. Think this through. Where's the catch?

It was obvious Zervathi had hidden some information. The question was how badly those details would screw him over. With the Guide as an intermediary, he should be able to

contain the damage. Kai refused to believe a random deity could bend the rules of the greatest power on Elydes.

Zervathi had purposely been vague about why he picked him. One reason must be his affinity for Space, though there must be more.

Because he thought I'd be an impressionable child? He did keep mentioning my age... and if I were a deity in need of help, I'd keep away from the Republic. The Seven Moons might not like their followers to help another deity.

Ultimately, the biggest issue was if he could complete the task. The Hidden Sanctuary must be the place where the beasts came from. Was it in a faraway land or...

Can it be a sub-dimension...?

Kai remembered Dora mentioning them in passing, mystic realms that orbited around Elydes' main dimension. From the books he found in Higharbor, they were more akin to a myth on the continent that only appeared in tales and legends.

Wait... is that the Blessing the Vastaire were thankful for?

The pieces began to fit together in his head. The Hidden Sanctuary wasn't an ideal paradise if it was swarmed by yellow beasts, but he didn't have to go there alone.

Focus on the current problem. How do I reach it?

He had to find 'the Altar of Covenant on the highest peak'—clear as a mud pit. It was probably somewhere in a Vastaire site, so that narrowed the search. He could just let the Republic carry him along. There weren't that many ruins left, and the name of the place sounded grand enough to be recognizable.

Yatei and Kahali watch over me.

The promised blessing was what made him in. Not just for the tempting boost, but because a god imprisoned for millennia must be short on divine power. If Zervathi was willing to invest energies in advance, he must have a decent chance at succeeding.

No pain, no gain. Nothing of value is ever easy.

Ding

The god of the Hidden Sanctuary, Zervathi, has bestowed a blessing of Space upon you!

Uh... No Favor? What a cheapskate.

Ding

You've accepted Zervathi's bargain. A binding pact has been struck, failure to complete the quest will result in you forfeiting your body to Zervathi.

Wait, what? That self-important asshole! I should have also specified the cost for failure.

Kai wanted to slap himself. He had known there would be a catch, but he couldn't stop himself from charging into it. He exhaled slowly, voices and steps echoed closer from the dark corridors.

I can do it. This doesn't change anything.

There was no choice but to succeed. He didn't know what Zervathi thought 'provide assistance' meant, but to him, it stopped well before getting killed. His plans hadn't changed, he needed to reach the Hidden Sanctuary to stop the beast attacks.

Now he had clues to the nature of the spatial anomalies and the assistance of a god. Until the deity was freed, their interests aligned, and the self-important asshole had sworn an oath to not harm any humans.

I should have said sapient species. Damn brain, why didn't you think of that...

Kai was about to test the difference in his Space affinity when another notification flashed in his vision. His arms slackened at his sides with a groan.

What now?

Ding

New Feat: Daring Haggler - You have spoken and successfully negotiated a bargain with a minor deity. You are awarded: +5 Favor!

Huh, at least the Guide isn't a miser. I can use all the Favor I get.

"What are you still doing here?" Makyn appeared in the doorway, scanning the chamber for threats. "Your shift for the day is over."

Kai beamed a smile. "Nothing much, just unveiling the mysteries of life. Why? Were you worried about me?"

The soldier regarded him with a flat stare.

"C'mon, there is no need to be ashamed, but I can take care of myself. I was looking for clues before the mad magicians blew up the place."

"Did you find anything?"

“No.” Iridescent mana motes fluttered in his vision, they stood out like stars in the clutter of ambient mana. Their seemingly random motion followed a pattern, congregating in clumps around the room. Kai slumped his posture. “Nothing at all.”

“You’ve tried your best. This is our only lead. The excavation of the main summoning chamber has been set in two days.”

“Can I be present?”

“If you won’t make problems.” The soldier peered at him.

Kai dutifully bobbed his head. “I’ll behave with the respect and reverence owed to a god.”

Maybe this won’t be a complete disaster after all.