

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 458 – The Curse

[Jake, I didn't want to disturb your training, but we've got a problem,' Xi piped up unexpectedly as he was about to invite the vampire in.

'What's the matter?' Jake asked, assuming that something had happened to the Village during his seclusion.

[Someone placed a curse on you.] She said gravely. [But you're fine for now.] She added immediately afterwards to reassure him.

Skeptical, Jake inspected the various health parameters listed in his Oracle Status without finding anything detrimental. It was only when he got down to the bottom that he found the mention 'Cursed'.

Scanning his body with his mind's eye, he discovered a foreign force in addition to the Fluid and Aether trying to encroach on his cells. Because his cells were already saturated with energy, the curse was stuck on the outside and could not harm him. Or was it for another reason?

For the moment this disruptive energy was in minority, but with each passing second it would assimilate a new Fluid or Aether strand as well as a fraction of his body heat and electrical energy, leading to a rapid build-up of its potency.

Jake made some quick calculations in his head and concluded that a normal human would have died within minutes from a heart attack

due to arrhythmia and if he persevered any longer, from hypothermia or brain arrest when the Aether forming his Proto-Soul or Soul would have drained off.

In his case, it would take longer than that, but once the curse entered his cells it would be all the same. The curse growing exponentially, he would have lasted a day at the most before collapsing.

Jake remembered the guy with the Shaman's Role that Tim had mentioned, but he refrained from jumping to any conclusions. The only other person who might know something about curses was Ostrexora. After all, it was just like a ghost to haunt a house and curse its inhabitants.

'Do you know how I can get rid of it?' Jake asked calmly. After all he'd been through in the last few months, he was not easily impressed.

[Yes and no.] Xi confessed sincerely. [If this had happened a week ago, I would have been very worried, but the situation has changed. Keeping your cells saturated with Fluid should keep you safe for at least a week. Having already completed your Main Mission, you just have to do your best during that time until the Oracle cleanses you.]

'That's not a solution.' Jake groused. 'How does the Oracle purge these curses?'

[It depends on where they come from. If they come from evil spirits, Soul and Spirit Attacks might be enough. If they work like a harmful computer worm feeding on its host, we can only try to force them out or make them think they've achieved their goal.]

'You mean I need to die?' Jake ridiculed. 'Let's try to eliminate it first instead. How do I do that?'

[Most Curses use a medium that binds them to the target person.] Xi patiently explained. [It could be a blood sample, a hair sample, or a personal object. Just as you establish a Servant Contract with the help of the Oracle System, a Curse is also a kind of Contract formed with Aether, except that it is done against your will. The person uses inert, non-sentient remains of you to replicate your Aetheric signature.]

[You know that Aether and Fluid are not fundamentally different. When a connection or Contract is made, it exists across time and space. Even if beyond a certain distance the Curse or Contract loses its effectiveness, it still exists, like a decree or law. One can easily disobey a law and hope not to get caught, but invalidating it is much more complicated.]

Jake became more and more disconcerted the longer she spoke. The mechanism behind these curses seemed extremely abstruse, but also hinted at some concerning flaws in the Oracle System.

‘Does this mean that one of these Curse Makers could theoretically make me sign a Slave Contract against my will?’

[If they have a willing sample of your Soul, yes. You’d feel it though if they did. Also, this is extremely advanced Aether science. The Player who cursed you must depend on an Aether Skill or Bloodline to perform these feats and there are probably many limitations. In this case, it can only affect your body even though the loss of Aether will eventually impact your Spirit Body and then your Soul.]

‘You still haven’t told me how the Oracle cleanses these Curses...’
Jake quipped with a twinge of annoyance.

[I’m getting to that. As with every Aether Skill, its effectiveness varies depending on the user. Curses are considered more like Soul or Aether Spells and therefore the intervention of the caster’s Spirit Body

is always required. So if the mental power of the Cursebreaker far outweighs that of the Cursecaster, lifting the Curse is actually pretty simple. Another solution is to change one's Aetheric or genetic signature enough so that the Curse no longer recognizes its target. There are also specific purification magics, but they don't always work and depend on the attribute or element of the Curse used.]

'It's worth a try.' Jake shrugged.

First he activated Bloodline Ignition and his cells to raise his temperature and he instantly became a human torch. Scanning the foreign energy in his cells, he saw it shrivel in a corner, but it didn't dissipate. Instead, it went on absorbing his body heat at the same rate as before.

'Massive amounts of heat don't work. Next test.' Jake made a mental note.

From a human torch, he then manipulated his tremendous energy to become a lamp man. An intense white light flashed from his body, so blinding that it felt like a bolt of lightning had just struck the room.

Again, the murky energy remained unaffected. Like Aether or Fluid, it seemed completely impervious to physical phenomena. The first two were nonetheless manipulable and Jake then tried to take control of it with his Spirit Body.

This failed miserably. It was like using a sieve to catch sand. The Curse motionlessly ignored all his efforts. Neither his Extrasensory Perception nor his Spirit Body Control were sufficient to provide the precision required for such manipulation. As he was about to give up, one last thought struck him.

Spiritual Silver Myrtharian Eyes on!

His vision changed and the cursed energy appeared clearly before his eyes. At that very moment, it was the only weakness in his own body. He still didn't know how to use proper offensive Soul Spells, but with this Skill he could try something.

The Golden Glyph 'Apex Predator' suddenly sprouted behind his galactic irises and he condensed all his mental strength and radiation soul attribute into them. His star-like eyes began to glow and a laser beam invisible to the naked eye shot out from them.

The Curse disintegrated instantly.

Jake was stunned for a moment, unable to comprehend how simple it had been. From Xi's dumbfounded silence, she shared his astonishment.

Krmhc, crmhc!

Hearing the commotion inside, Carmin realized that Jake was well aware of her arrival, and she began to pound on the door mercilessly. In reality, he hadn't kept her waiting that long. With his brain speed, his discussions with Xi rarely lasted more than a few seconds.

'Tsk! So annoying...' Jake choked back a profanity as he heard her racket while, with a wave of his hand, opened the huge door wings with his telekinesis.

A pouting Carmin, arms akimbo, appeared on the other side of the door. Her bewitching face had shed its coldness, replaced by a much more human expression. Dusting off her dress, she walked with dignity inside.

The hall was still warm, but Jake had already erased most of the traces of his experiments. The room where he had tested his skills would remain out of use for a while though...

‘Why did you make me wait so long?’ She shamelessly sat down in one of the stone chairs before freezing as she còcked her head at him. ‘Who are you?’

Jake was taken aback by this question. Not noticing any drastic changes in his stats, height or weight, he hadn’t even bothered to look in the mirror. After all, he was used to seeing them increase.

[I forgot to tell you...] Xi murmured embarrassedly.

Fearing the worst, Jake turned pale and hurried to conjure a decent mirror with his powers. When he saw his reflection, he also froze, but for a different reason than he had imagined.

The reflection that showed up in the mirror was... refreshingly normal. Even handsome. Not the kind of handsomeness an Earthman could hope to achieve, but he was definitely not as scary as before.

Sure, he was over 2m50, but being over 2m wasn’t uncommon among the Players. Even Carmin was almost six feet tall. What was most pleasing was that although his weight and stats had increased, his exaggerated musculature and beastly Kintharian features had begun to recede.

The process had already begun when he became a Silver Myrtharian, but his skin was now quite fair and looked just right. No longer thick and hard like cowhide, but healthily tanned. His hair and irises were now completely silver, with a glint of gold. His jaw and fangs were also no longer as prominent.

Paradoxically, one might have thought that he had become weaker, but this was not so. With his Silver Stone Skin Skill lvl3, he could modulate these external parameters at will.

‘Ahem, why do you want to see me?’ Jake covered his awkwardness by tackling the pesky issue head-on.

Carmin kept staring at him with wide-eyed interest for a few seconds before remembering she was here for a reason. Her amazement gave way to grief and her mouth opened and closed repeatedly with indecision as if she was still horror-stricken by the request she was about to make. It was only then that Jake noticed the dried red marks under her eyes.

At long last, she took the plunge,

‘Help me kill someone.’
