THE LONE WANDERER

'Ugh! It feels like all my nerves were ripped out of my body and then stomped on for good measure!'

The last thing Percy remembered was the thrill of finally reaching Orange after a decade of relentless effort. The jeers and sneers from his cousins and uncles had only pushed him onward. He'd done it – tripled his remaining lifespan and achieved a new level of power. He'd made it!

His first act had been to try tapping into his family's bloodline once more. The Clone ability had always eluded him, but perhaps now, with his newly strengthened core, things would be different. He remembered the initial rush of mana and then... pain. A lot of pain. A world of pain.

'I'm not exactly an expert, but I don't think excruciating agony is a common side effect of using a bloodline ability.'

As he fought to open his eyes, he was greeted by a strange sight. A creature with humanoid features – but certainly not human – stood before him. Its skin was pale as milk, its eyes pitch black, resembling obsidian orbs that

glimmered with an emotion Percy couldn't quite discern. *Worry*, perhaps? The creature's strained smile and tightly clenched fists at the edge of the crib betrayed its concern.

There was another standing opposite the first, this one bulkier. A male? It was hard to tell. Both were hairless and wore baggy robes concealing any distinguishing traits. Percy raised his hands with difficulty, noticing they were tiny and the same pale colour as the giants around him. His skin was smooth as porcelain.

'What's happening? Who are these people?'

He tried to speak, to ask a question, but no sound emerged. To his horror, he realized he couldn't breathe. The female – at least, he thought it was female – panicked, moving a device to his mouth and casting an air spell. A breath was forced into his lungs and, though it hurt, it kept him conscious. *Barely*.

Scanning his surroundings, he noticed the walls were sleek, made of some polished material. They definitely didn't have anything of the sort back on Remior. Strange decorations adorned the room – there was a painting that seemed to have been drawn in three directions, *somehow*! Through the window, he glimpsed three suns – green, yellow, and blue – illuminating a turquoise sky.

At any other time, Percy might have appreciated the novelty of the situation. Right now, however, it only brought him unease. Desperately, he turned to the

only source of familiarity he could think of. His Status tab. He summoned it, hoping it still worked.

Guhat (Percival's clone)

'What the hell?!?'

His relief at being able to check his Status was quickly replaced by shock. Guhat was probably the name given to this body, but what did it mean by 'Percival's clone'? Wasn't he the real Percy?

'Wait. Clone? I succeeded?!?'

Under other circumstances, he would be ecstatic. His family had given him a ton of grief over his inability to use it. Everyone, Percy included, thought he simply hadn't inherited it.

But this wasn't how it was supposed to work. Fuelled by their life affinity, the Avalon House's bloodline allowed them to cultivate a biological copy of themselves to delegate dangerous or tedious tasks to.

'Did I inherit a mutated version? Or is it because I don't have the life affinity?'

Percy had never been sure of his affinity. The standard test at age five had shown nothing, but there was a slim chance he had a rare affinity it couldn't detect. Of course, better tests existed, but his family hadn't thought it worth the resources on a Red core like him.

'Let's see what I'm dealing with here.' he thought, focusing on his Status once more.

Guhat (Percival's clone)

Mana cores:
- **[Mana core 1 – Red – ???]**
- **[Mana core 2 – Red – ???]**

???:
- **[???]** – Grants access to your Status.
- **[???]** – Grants a second mana core.

'WHAT?!?'

Losing his Orange core stung given how long it took to get there. But it made sense since he was in a new, infant body. *Two* cores, on the other hand?!? He'd never heard of anyone possessing more than one. Well, that wasn't quite right. Percy had never heard of a *human* possessing multiple cores, but he did vaguely recall a rumour of an alien race famous for precisely that.

'What were they called? Moi-somethings?'

He couldn't remember the exact name, but they stood out even among the countless species the Divine Order protected his world from.

'And now, I *get to be one of them?!?'*

His eyes almost sparkled with hope, but he quickly quashed the optimism. What was he thinking? He was just a botched clone who wouldn't survive much longer. His new body barely functioned. He couldn't even breathe without assistance. Everything hurt, and he felt himself beginning to collapse. Even if he survived, both his cores were Red, leaving him at the bottom of the pecking order here as well.

'No! I can't give up so easily! I want to live! I want a chance!'

He clawed desperately at his fading consciousness. The pain was excruciating, as if he were being ground to dust, but he refused to give up. He didn't care he was just a clone. He didn't care his cores were Red. He had to fight with what he had. To live with what he had. To make the most of what he had.

But sometimes sheer will wasn't enough.

The air affinity spell was beginning to hurt more than it helped. His heart felt like it was about to burst, darkness seeping into his vision. At the same time, an inescapable force pulled him, slowly prying him out of the broken body. As Guhat's eyes closed, the blurry silhouettes of the couple he guessed were his parents faded, their distraught cries replaced by silence.

His final thought was a bitter one.

'I'm sorry for putting you guys through this...'