

KNOCK, KNOCK

Percy opened the door, finding his grandpa outside as usual.

This time, however, baldy wasn't alone. He was accompanied by somebody who looked almost identical to him. Like a twin brother. The only differences to the naked eye were that the second baldy wore different robes and had a vacant expression.

Percy made way for the two to enter, but his grandpa shook his head. Instead, he gestured for the young man to follow him to the garden. As soon as they reached the training grounds, baldy and his clone stopped at the same time, which looked a bit creepy.

“What do you know about the Clone bloodline?” Archibald asked. “The normal version, I mean.”

Percy dug through his memories for all the information about the ability. Truth be told, his understanding of it was quite comprehensive. After all, it wasn't exactly a great secret that his family had it. Plus, his cousins never stopped boasting about it.

“They take a while to make, but that decreases with one's grade, so I suppose it should be much faster for you. The clones can't think for themselves, and they can't even use magic, but they can be given simple commands. Supposedly, they make great labourers.”

Baldy nodded.

“That's the gist of it, but there are a few more key points to consider. First, use your other senses to examine it.”

Following his grandpa's instructions, Percy activated Mana Sense. While there was some life mana flowing through the clone's body, it didn't have a core whatsoever. There was nothing but a slightly denser concentration of mana in its sternum. This pretty much aligned with what he expected.

Next, he switched to Soul Vision. He should have probably seen this coming too, but the clone didn't have a normal soul either. There was only a small silvery wisp burning in its chest. It looked like a gentle breeze could blow it out at any moment.

Percy had a lot of questions now.

“Are they even useful?”

If it couldn't use magic, why invest so much time and mana to make one?

Archibald smiled.

The clone walked to the oak tree by the centre of the garden and threw out a punch.

BOOOOOOM

Percy's ears buzzed as he stared at the devastation in shock. A large circular hole now pierced through the trunk, its diameter about half the width of the tree. The clone pointed its fist towards Percy, showing him that there wasn't even a scratch on it.

"As you can see, the clones inherit the physical capabilities of their creator. At Violet, each of my clones has over 240 times the speed, strength and durability of somebody at Red." Archibald explained.

"Not just that, but the number of clones one can have also scales similarly. I can have 243 of them active at the same time. Although they drain my mana constantly to exist. Normally, I only keep about 60 of them, so that I still have enough for other things."

GULP

Percy swallowed hard.

'243 monsters like that... That's a freaking army!'

His grandpa was even scarier than he realized.

“But we aren’t here for me to brag. What we want is for you to watch me make one.”

Then, Archibald stretched his palm towards the clone, visibly draining his mana back. As the green ribbons flowed out of its orifices, its visage shrivelled like a mummy. Soon, it collapsed on the ground, its flesh desiccating at an alarming rate. It wasn’t long before it was nothing but a sack of skin and bones. And moments later, even that collapsed into a pile of fine dust.

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‘Geez. Thank Phoebe I haven’t eaten anything.’

Percy wasn’t generally squeamish, but watching what looked like his grandpa wither into nothingness like that was more than a little disturbing.

Archibald chuckled.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Do you think your version is going to end up much prettier?”

Right. Percy had to figure out how to keep the worst of that from happening to his *soul*.

“Before we begin, do you have any other questions?” baldy asked.

The young man looked back to where the clone had stood just moments ago.

“Please tell me you’re going to burn those robes.”

The two had returned to Archibald’s office. Baldy would rather sit while doing this and Percy wanted none of this taking place inside his room.

Currently, the young man had Mana Sense active, carefully observing everything happening between his grandpa's hands. There, a green bubble was suspended, pulsing like a heart at regular intervals. A dark silhouette was faintly visible beneath its surface, its shape resembling that of a fetus.

And it was growing fast. *Really fast.*

It had only been about 10 minutes since baldy began his demonstration. At the start, the glowing sphere had only been about as large as a pea, but it had already reached the size of a tangerine. According to his grandpa, it would only take about an hour for it to grow to a baby, at which point the bubble wouldn't be necessary anymore.

This was all bizarre.

Percy had seen other clones in the past, but this was his first time watching the gestation process. As much as his cousins loved to parade them around, nobody had time to show him how they were made.

A Red core had to spend nine months to grow a clone, not unlike a normal pregnancy. From there, each grade cut that time to about a third. This meant most of his relatives needed anywhere between a little over a week to a full month to do this!

Luckily, his grandpa would be done by tomorrow, so he could resume the arduous task of filling his second core up.

“Percy. I suggest you focus on what I’m doing, as I’m not repeating this for you.” baldy snapped.

“Right.” the young man agreed, tapping into his Mana Sense again.

This time, he didn’t look at the bubble but focused on his grandpa’s body instead. That’s where all the interesting things were happening. Baldy’s core thrummed, sending waves of mana rippling through every muscle, every bone, every vein. Once they reached the man’s skin, they bounced back, but they did so at an angle. This seemed to create another stream of waves of a different shape, which flowed towards his hands.

'Yeah, ok. I still don't know how exactly I did what I did two months ago, but it wasn't nearly as... organized as this.'

Percy spent a couple more hours carefully observing his grandpa's handiwork, marvelling at the sheer elegance and refinement of the technique. Only after the clone had already reached the size of a toddler did he deactivate his Mana Sense. Not that he was bored. *Far from it!*

He could have kept watching this for ages. Plus, he didn't want to waste his grandpa's efforts.

The reason he had stopped was because at some point, an idea took root in his head.

Gathering the mana in his eyes, Percy activated Soul Vision. He watched the clone carefully, searching for something specific. Even though the clone lacked a complete soul, he remembered spotting a faint wisp in the one earlier. The young man knew life users didn't create them intentionally. After all, not even his grandpa had any way of manipulating soul mana.

'No. It's likely just a side effect.'

Watching the flow of life mana had certainly been informative, but if he could also observe how that silvery wisp came into being, it could give him some more insight into his own version.

Percy was back in his room, resting on his bed.

The sun was still out, as the duo had stayed up all night, his grandpa not finishing the demonstration until late in the following morning. Apparently, it was possible to pause the process and resume later, which other people had to do, as they couldn't keep it up for several months at a time. Archibald on the other hand, preferred to make each clone in a single session. He said it helped minimize the mana losses.

Either way, his grandpa's habits weren't what was going through the young man's head right now.

'How does that even make sense?'

Percy had devoted the last 15 or so hours of the demonstration trying to figure out how that tiny soul wisp had formed.

And he did have an answer. He just struggled accepting it. The formation of the clone's *body* had been straightforward. The life mana had first travelled through baldy, embedding all the necessary information before being passed to the clone. Once there, it had turned into the building blocks making up its flesh, guided by the accompanying information.

There was a clear link between Archibald and the clone's bodies!

But that wasn't the case when it came to their souls. At no point had Percy seen any soul mana leaving his grandpa. Yet, the clone's tiny soul had kept growing regardless. It was as if the two were entirely independent entities. As if the clone had developed its own soul, as a natural consequence of being *alive*.

'This isn't what I want to be doing.'

Percy didn't want his own clones to be dumb as bricks. His affinity clearly didn't want that either, which was why his version of the ability involved splitting up his own soul.

'I suppose I'm gonna have to perform a lot of tests.'

But that was tomorrow's problem.

For now, what he needed was some sleep.