

Hearing that Kyle was healthy was a weight off of everyone's shoulders. He had been gone for more than a few days and the fact that we haven't heard anything from him was beginning to make us all nervous. Watching him take off into the air, with a big smile on his face had just been the icing on the cake.

We talked for a while, the group bombarding him with questions about his new powers. He explained that while he had gotten most of Superman's abilities, with assurances that his others would eventually come through, they were stuck at about fifty percent of a full Kryptonian. He also apparently lost the ability to push past his limits.

The scans had shown that him pushing himself was his body using bits of Kryptonian biology that weren't supported properly, and was therefore causing him a significant amount of pain, damaging his body on a cellular level. He was pushing himself closer to Superman's strength and speed, but the result was pain and damage. He explained that now that everything was smoothed over and organized, he couldn't push himself that far at all anymore.

"Good," Kaldur had responded, catching Kyle off guard. "Forcing you to use that level of strength would have been unfortunate."

"It really didn't look fun," Robin said with a smirk. "You are already pretty strong anyway."

Superboy demonstrated a few more abilities, running as a streak around the cave before stopping and zapping the water with heat vision. He also took a really deep breath and blew out, the air rushing past us, causing Tora and Wally to stumble back.

"Impressive," Kaldur responded with a smile.

Most of the team left to head to the gym, both Kyle and Wally interested in what his top speed was, while Kaldur was interested to see if he had gotten any stronger. Meanwhile, I held back, M'gann stopping and walking back to me.

"*What's wrong?*" She asked, taking my hand.

"*What? Oh, nothing!*" I assured her, giving her hand a squeeze. "*I just wanted to put more time into practicing before tonight. If I get it down perfectly I might finally get to start metalbending. I-*"

"*Warren, I watched you practice for three hours this morning, and while-I-liked-the-view,*" She thought to me, rushing and blushing through the last part. "*I know you are ready. Overstraining yourself is just as bad as under practicing.*"

I let out a sigh, nodding along and giving M'gann a hug.

*"Yeah... Yeah, your right. I just really want to start learning metalbending. I guess I got myself worked up a bit,"* I admitted, letting out a long breath. *"Thanks for pulling me back."*

*"Of course, what else is a..."* She trailed off and blushed, looking away clearly unsure about our labels.

I smiled and tilted her head up, giving her a small kiss on her lips, before stepping away slightly.

*"I'm lucky to have a girlfriend like you,"* I said, smiling at her cute reaction, as she snuggled her face into my chest. *"C'mon, let's go see what Superboy can do."*

*"Oh, we should get takeout to celebrate!"* The adorable Martian suggested.

*"Not a bad idea,"* I agreed, heading down the hall with M'gann, holding her hand. *"Superboy can choose where we go."*

We spent a few hours with the team, experimenting with Kyle's new abilities. His speed was incredible, though Wally had him beat pretty easily. Despite this Wally still looked a little annoyed at his own top speed. I made a mental note to talk to him about it, adding it to the note about his eating habits.

After we explored the limits of Kyle's strength, speed, and a bit of his flying, which he was still new to but was clearly getting better at, we spent a while in the grotto testing his heat vision. We started with some armor plates from storage, set in ice thanks to Tora. He blasted through them pretty easily, and through the ice itself. I created a slab of stone for him to practice on as well. The streaks of red energy hit the stone and stopped, heating it up more and more before it eventually collapsed under its own weight. I ended up shoving the entire thing into the water to cool, having to scoop some of it up with more rock because I lost control of it when it was hot enough to become soft.

After spending a while messing around, we ordered Chinese food, from somewhere close to the Zeta-Tube in Central City. It was an early dinner but a few of us had skipped lunch, so where were all hungry. Eventually, the night ran down and everyone was off doing their own thing. M'gann volunteered to take an early night so I could meditate without bothering her. I agreed after getting a promise from her that we would bring up letting her get a little closer contact with everyone soon.

I headed back down into the grotto, taking my time. I climbed onto my usual spot, crossed my legs, and closed my eyes. It took a moment to release my coiled stress, but when I finally opened my eyes I was back in the arena-style training area, with the artificial Toph standing in front of me.

“Welcome back Mopey,” She said with a grin. “Are you ready to show off what you’ve learned while you were away?”

Instead of answering, I fell backward into the ground, surrounding myself in sand and stone before bursting back upwards, fully encased in earthen armor.

“Damn Mopey, that’s not bad!” She said, walking around me, looking me up and down. “A bit thicker than I would make it, but then again you’re trying to stop bullets, not arrows or bolts.”

She put her hand on my chest and suddenly I could feel my bending start to waver, her chi pushing against mine. I pushed back, struggling for a moment before she finally overwhelmed me and blasted the rock and dirt around my chest completely off. I managed to hold on to control of the earth around my arms, face, and legs but my chest was basically clean.

“Ordinarily I would have failed you for not lasting longer with that,” She explained, walking away. “But as far as we know there aren’t any other earthbenders in your world, so you’ll never have to fight for control like that.”

“What about other geokinetics?” I asked, letting the remaining sand and rock fall from my body. “How is that going to work?”

“I have no idea.” She answered bluntly, looking over her shoulder as she walked away. “Not part of the package they gave me. I would guess that either you will trump them or they will trump you. Past that... just be better.”

Shaking my head at her vague and very unhelpful advice, I followed behind my teacher as she made her way to a corner of the arena space we hadn’t used before. It was filled with metal pieces of different types, shapes, and sizes. She flexed and moved her hand, a seat pushing up from the stone ground.

“Pull up a chair. It’s time to talk about metalbending.”

I nodded and quickly bended up a seat for myself, going the extra mile to turn the center into sand so it would be more comfortable. The construct nodded in approval, sitting quietly for a moment like she was compiling her thoughts.

“Metalbending is one of the youngest additions to bending, young enough that there is still a lot to be learned about it,” Toph explained. “At least there was at the last point that you saw, during Korra’s adventure. When the original Toph discovered it, earthbenders had been trying for centuries to control metal as they controlled Earth.”

From somewhere in her robe the construct pulled out a chunk of metal, making it shift and change shape from a general clump to a pretty accurate-looking cube. She then cycled through a variety of shapes before returning it to the cube.

“Toph was able to connect with the particles of rock and earth inside the metal, its tiny impurities. With her impressive earthbending skill, she was able to move the metal by moving the earth inside of it.” The Toph copy explained. “She actually got pretty lucky, if the Fire Nation had spent a few more coins on making that metal prison, there wouldn't have been enough impurities for it to work.”

She stood from her seat and walked to a sheet of metal, what looked like just a slab of iron. She put her hand on it and squeeze, the metal whining as she crumpled it, tearing finger holes in the process.

“Bending metal like this is brutal, your really bending metal all that much, instead the majority of movement is caused by dragging the metal around by the chunks of impurities inside it. It's why during her adventure with the Avatar all of Toph's metalbending is brutal, filled with crushing, tearing, and crumpling.”

She demonstrated again, this time with the metal in her hand. Originally it had been transitioning between shapes pretty smoothly, but now it crushed and shifted with a level of imprecision that was obvious. She formed it back into a smooth cube when she was done.

“However, over time and practice your connection to metal itself gets stronger and stronger. You have to depend less and less on the particles, allowing you to bend the metal itself, resulting in more precise bending. It's why by the time Korra began her adventure, metal bending was cleaner and more refined. It *could* be brutal when it needed to be, but it was no longer a basic, unexplored idea, unrefined art.”

As she talked, she pressed her hands against the torn and crumpled section of metal, slowly massaging it smooth, sealing up the holes. The metal was behaving less like metal and more like clay under her hands.

“A novice will struggle to bend even lightly processed steel, while a journeyman metal bender will only have to work hard at bending extremely well-processed metals.”

“What about platinum?” I asked. “In the show, it was impossible to bend because it was too pure.”

“That was an incorrect assumption. Platinum *is* impossible for you to bend, but not because it is too pure. Yes, high purity can make metals harder for less experienced benders to bend, but that isn't why platinum is unbendable. We don't know why platinum is unbendable, just like we don't know why some comets make firebenders more powerful, or why the full moon empowers waterbenders. Or why metalbending works better on meteorites.”

“So purity makes bending harder, but a skilled bender can overcome that. But platinum cannot be bent?” I asked, organizing my thoughts.

“Correct. This theory was becoming popular by the time Toph passed on.” The construct explained as if she wasn't wearing the face of the woman she was talking about. “But no one can explain why beyond ‘spirit shenanigans’”

“So what does this mean for me?” I asked. “The metal used these days is pretty pure.”

“In that case, you may be working at this for a while before you can consistently use the metal in your environment.” She answered, tossing me the hunk of metal she had used for the first demonstration. “You’ll just have to bring your own, or stick with earthbending at first.”

I looked down at the chunk of metal, pushing my energy into it, only for it to immediately disperse. I tried again, and a third time before I pulled back, unable to find anything for my energy to hold on to.

“What is this?”

“It’s just a lump of high processed steel,” She explained with a smirk. “You would have a real hard time learning to metalbend with that. Much better to start with a chunk of meteorite. I hope you have some to practice with outside?”

“Yeah, I think Batman was running it through some scans before bringing it to the cave,” I answered.

“Good. Let’s get you started with some here.”

The construct grabbed a hunk of metal, one that looked basically identical to the hunk of iron I was already holding. I tossed that to the side as she threw the new chunk to me. Again I caught it, closed my eyes, and focused on the metal. As I pushed my energy into it I could feel... something. It was barely noticeable, just on the edge of my weird, chi, energy senses. It was very much there though.

I pushed more energy into the chunk of stone, focusing on the feeling, pushing and pulling at the metal. At first, for a very long while, nothing happened. My energy would sink into the metal and simply float away, dissipate into the surrounding area, just like it had for the iron. Over time I got a better grip on the impurities, my energy flowing through them in a way that was very similar to how I could work with stone.

I focused on them, my eyes still closed as I pulled and pushed, tugged, and stretched, trying to force my energy to move the metal. I could feel my frustration building when I felt a clod of sand hit my chest.

“Don’t let anger cloud your mind. Anger is a cheat for firebending, not earth or metalbending,” She explained. “Take a deep breath, clear your mind. The metal will bend before you. You are unmovable, the solid object in which all else will break.”

I took a deep breath, holding it for a long moment before finally letting it out slowly, closing my eyes once again. I kept breathing, letting my frustration melt away, and focusing on my will.

I was solid

I was immovable.

I was unbreakable

I pushed my will, my energy into the metal chunk, latching onto the impurities before infusing the metal. I held the chunk of metal in my hand, and twisted the other, pulling at the metal and the impurities within. At first, nothing happened. The metal remained unchanged. I kept focused though, shifting my will slightly, and suddenly the creak of twisted metal echoed through the arena. I opened my eyes to find the hunk of metal had been twisted into a stretched-out shape.

I jumped up and cheered, spiking the meteorite and jumping up into the air, pumping my fist.

“Fuck yeah!”

“Not bad Mopey, you got it pretty quick, only took about an hour or so,” The Toph construct said, clapping as I cheered. “That’s a good sign for your metalbending talent.”

I celebrated a bit more, before eventually calming down a bit. I picked up the metal and tried again, working on it for another hour, keeping it up until I could reliably twist, manipulate and shift the metal as I wanted. I was starting to work it into shapes when my teacher stopped me.

“I want you to keep up this training when you are outside in the real world until you can bend metal however you want,” She said, nodding when I eagerly agreed. “I want you to manipulate metal as easily as you manipulate earth. That’s going to take a while, and I don’t expect you to move away from meteorite metal for a while at least, but keep practicing and you’ll get there. For now, I’m going to show you another technique I want you to start practicing as well. I think it’s a technique that you will get a lot of use out of.”

I watched as she grabbed a circular container attached to a belt, just like I had on my costume. She wrapped the belt around her hips and flicked her hand out, a metal cable firing

out of the container, the head slamming into a rock before flicking back. At first, I thought she was just flicking out the solid metal head, but as she flicked her arm around and the metal wire itself responded, realized she was actually controlling the entire length of wire at once. Or at least the majority. The cable spun and wrapped around the stone, tightening hard enough to dig into the stone when Toph jerked her hand backward.

“I’m sure you remember some of the things these kinds of wires were used for from the show, but they are incredibly flexible,” She explained, stomping to cut the cable.

She shifted her stance, the cable doubling up before suddenly hardening solid, the cable fusing together into the shape of a staff with a bulb of metal at the end. Toph swung it around and jumped forward, the chunk of metal at the end of the staff smashing into the same stone she had just wrapped up, cracking it down the middle.

“Where stone is inflexible, metal is only limited by your imagination.” She said, before pulling off the belt and handing it to me. “Give it a shot.”

I spent the next several hours working on my wire control, trying my best to control the thin strands of metal. By the end of it, I was starting to get the hang of influencing it but wasn’t having much success actually controlling what the wires did beyond flopping them around.

“I want you to work on this, and the shaping of metal,” Toph said when she finally called our session to an end. “Come back when you have both under control.”

I tensed for a moment, waiting for her to banish me forcefully like she had the last few times. She only chuckled and shook her head.

“I suggest replacing the wire in your costume with meteorite metal, as well as your shield,” She said with a smile. “And keep up with your normal earthbending warm-ups and practices!”

I opened my mouth to agree, but between blinks, I was back in the grotto.