

Toph ran me through a brutal run of most of the major things she had taught me over the last month or so, all while sparing rather aggressively. By the time we had moved on to my metal bending skills, I was feeling the strain of pushing my bending, as well as the slowly encroaching physical fatigue.

I knew I could outlast the real Toph physically, even when she was in her prime, but this wasn't the real Toph. By the time we reached the third hour of constant, relentless sparing, it was clear that it didn't have to worry about running out of stamina. When she was, apparently, finally satisfied that I had kept up with my training and hadn't forgotten anything during my time away, she finished the spar by yanking away my control over the metal and stone I was using, slamming me into the ground in the process.

"Fuuuccckkk," I groaned out, rolling over onto my back as my stone armor cracked and fell away. "A little rough, don't you think?"

"What, you want me to go easy on you?" She asked her disapproval at the notion clearly audible. "Not gonna happen, Mopey."

"No, I don't," I admitted, grunting as I stood up despite the soreness. "Was that enough?"

"Yup! I could tell just how much you've progressed. Congrats Mopey, you're on par with some of the more naturally talented Metalbenders that the real Toph ever met," She admitted with a smirk. "Your connection to metal has progressed rapidly. You're clearly bending meteorite metal well, why don't you show me how you work on normal metal?"

At her suggestion, we made our way to a corner of the training pit, where most of the practice metals existed, spread out in several forms. She picked up a sizable, rectangular ingot, which looked like almost every other ingot, and threw it to me. By now, I was well used to her antics, so I was ready to catch the heavy chunk of metal.

"How pure is this?" I asked, gripping the ingot at both ends and infusing it with my energy.

"It's a common quality steel," Toph explained, watching as I struggled to shift it, slowly twisting it, pouring tons of energy into it. "How bad?"

"Definitely not good enough to use in a fight," I responded, shaking my head. "Damn, I thought I progressed past this, at least."

"You're thinking about it wrong," Toph assured me before picking up another ingot and throwing it to me. "Try this."

I caught the new ingot and tried to bend it, finding it much easier to shift and bend, working for a few seconds to create a halfway decent cube. It wasn't nearly as easy as meteorite metal, but it wasn't nearly as difficult as the steel had been.

"What is this?" Holding up the new cube.

"That is what would be considered high-quality steel during Korra's time as the Avatar," She explained before gesturing to the ingot I had dropped on the ground. "While that is a common steel alloy for your world. You're comparing what you're capable of to what metal benders were capable of in the shows. Unfortunately for you, bending the metal of that era was much easier because our metal was so much less pure."

"So... Basically, I'm screwed until I get much better?" I asked, nudging the pure ingot with my foot. "At least so far as precise metalbending the metal around me."

"Most likely? Yes, you're going to have to get much better if you want to do anything precise," The construct agreed. "That said, you're ahead of where I thought you would be. When you're practicing outside of here, I want you to focus on bending higher and higher quality steel. Beyond helping you get better with bending pure metals, it will also raise your connection with the metal as a whole."

We spent the next hour or so bending various different purities and various different metals. So far, I had been focusing primarily on iron and its alloys, mostly steel, so bending other metals was an interesting experience. I made a note to request some of the more commonly used metals besides iron and steel, like aluminum and copper.

After spending ten minutes messing around with bending a couple of gold ingots, Toph guided me to a stack of meteor metal ingots.

"So, you've got a firm grasp on metalbending, firm enough that you're working on mastering increasingly pure forms of metal. At this point, you're ready to start working on some more techniques."

She put her hand over the pile and jerked upwards, one of the ingots lifting off the ground just high enough to catch it.

"Being able to manipulate earth and metal from a distance can be an incredibly powerful technique. This will go double for you, considering just how much metal you use in your world. Once you have mastered a certain level of pure metal and get this technique down, you will be able to tear a knife or gun from someone's hand with a quick gesture."

She swung her arm out, and nearby, about five meters away, one of the pure steel ingots launched itself from its pallet and slammed into one of the raised sheets of metal, making a deafening sound and leaving a fist-sized dent.

"Now, with where you are with metal bending, you *should* be able to learn how to do this with meteorite metal," She explained, holding up her hand before continuing. "However, you should learn how to do this with earthbending first and then apply it to your metal bending. The original Toph believed that this led to finer control later on."

I nodded, following my instructor as she led me back to one of the earthbending areas before creating a pillar and placing a fist-sized stone on it. She stepped back and motioned me to come forward.

"Put your hand as close to the rock as possible and infuse it gently with your energy," She said as I stepped closer, putting my hand out as instructed. "Explore the rock completely with your earthbending, learn every fault, chip, and inclusion. I want you to know this rock better than you know your right hand! Oh, and close your eyes!"

I nodded and did as she said, slowly infusing the stone with my energy, my chi. I could sense it through my earthbending ability, my energy painting a mental image of this stone's interior. It was much more difficult to do without actually touching the rock, which made me wonder how I could ever influence something more than a few inches away. As I worked hard to explore the stone in far greater detail than I had any other rock or stone, I closed my eyes. After a few seconds, Toph continued to talk, though her tone had shifted as if she was reading from something.

"When we bend, we utilize our own chi to influence the world around us," She started, continuing after a pause. "Each of the elements is different and requires a different mindset, as well as a different connection to the energy around us, to influence. But the energy itself remains the same. All benders draw in chi, let it flow through their bodies, and then use it to bend their element."

As she talked, I could hear her walking around me, her voice coming from my left, then behind me, then to my right. As she walked around the stone I was focusing on, she continued again.

"What type of energy could be used by one person to break through rock and manipulate metal but let another person create waves of frigid water?"

As she talked, I sent another pulse of energy through the stone in front of me, feeling out a small crack that ran along the top. I was careful not to push too much energy into it, not wanting to actually change the stone in any way.

"Chi is the energy of life, of existence. It radiates from everywhere, saturates everything, filtering through the world around us before being drawn in and infusing us. Every rock, tree, and frog squirrel has chi running through them. This is the spirit of the object, and if the object

has a strong enough spirit, it can even become sentient. Even ideas, stories, or concepts have an effect on chi."

I listened to her as she talked, noting that the stone had a slight inclusion where it rested on the stand, a different type of rock that my energy traveled through slightly differently.

"So, if the very energy we use to influence the world around us comes from the world around us, then what is the difference between us and the world around us?" She asked, pausing for a moment before continuing. "The answer is...nothing. There is nothing separating us from the world around us. We are part of the universe in the same way that every tree is, that every animal, big or small, is. We exude the energy of life even as we take it in. There is no difference between you and the stone in front of you. The energy of life, chi, flows through both."

There was almost something hypnotic about how she was speaking, her pauses and her intonations, like she was trying to calm me, trying to help me connect...

"And just as the same energy flows through you, the same energy permeates the world. There is no separation between the rocks beneath your feet, the stone by your hand, or the rocks surrounding this pit. They all radiate the same energy as you, all one with the universe, as are you. And if everything in the universe is one, if we are all connected, if we are all one and the same, then does distance matter? Nothing separates you from the stone, just inches from your palm. Would it matter if the stone was an inch or twenty? A foot or a meter? A meter or a mile?"

A long pause began to stretch out. I could feel the stone just inches from my palm, feel every detail. I knew this stone as easily as if I held it in my hand and had studied every inch. Better than that because I could feel its internal structure.

"Bend the stone, Warren. Make it into a cube." Toph instructed, suddenly standing next to me.

Without thinking, I followed her instructions, easily shifting the stone into as perfect a cube as I could make. I even spent a few extra seconds making sure all the corners were at right angles.

"Good, now check your work," Toph said, shoving me just hard enough to push me forward a step.

I cursed, flailing a bit as I didn't want to knock over the pedestal or the stone I had just turned into a cube. Except, when I opened my eyes, there was nothing in front of me. I looked around, and about forty-five feet away was the pedestal, with a near-perfect cube sitting on top.

"The truth is, bending a rock that is several meters away shouldn't be any more difficult than bending one that is only a few inches away," The fake Toph construct explained, walking

across the gap to grab the stone. "We instill that difficulty ourselves because we think it should be more difficult. Earthbenders and firebenders struggle the most with this concept, so a little lecture-assisted mediation can help you with the initial breakthrough."

"So... all of that was to get me to let go and stop fighting myself?" I asked, catching the stone cube as she threw it at me.

"Kind of? The original Toph never put much weight into the more philosophical elements of bending, but it was a common belief in those that did," She answered. "You're still going to struggle to really reach out and bend at range, every foot will be hard work. But even being able to reach out three or four meters will be a game changer, and this exercise can make it easier to really understand that you are capable of it."

We spent the next half hour working on a few different ways to practice ranged bending, from just knocking a stone marble off a pedestal to making a stone maze and forcing a marble through it. When she was done showing me, she nodded with a smile.

"Alright, I want you to work at all of these, stretching out your maximum distance as much as you can," She explained. "Keep in mind that even master-level earth benders struggle to reach out past thirty meters, and Toph never reached forty-three."

"Alright, when should I come back?"

"When you start earthbending at ten meters, I want you to try and translate that to metal bending," She answered. "Once you get a few meters out of that, you can come back, and I'll start teaching you your next technique. As long as you keep up the practice while you're working on the new stuff."

I nodded and waited, expecting her to do what she always did and knock me awake, either with a prank or a shove to something.

"Uh... is that it?" I asked after a moment or two just waiting.

"No, but it was funny watching you wait for me to do something," She responded, laughing to herself as she made her way back to the metal bending area.

She stopped in front of another pile of ingots. After a moment, the construct stomped her foot and launched a singular ingot into the air, far above her head, as it came down at her, she struck upwards, the metal meeting her fingertips and almost liquifying, covering her hand and arm all the way to her elbow. It solidified quickly but still moved as she opened her hand, showing that each individual finger was wrapped in metal.

"This is the final form of my metal armor technique," She explained, running through a series of moves to show off its flexibility. "It took me almost twenty-five years to perfect. The

metal needs constant energy to keep from solidifying, it requires a deep connection to metal to bend it this fluidly, and it takes an iron will to manipulate that much metal when it is covering your entire body. Even I struggle to do it this cleanly when the metal isn't meteor metal."

She fell forward onto the stack of ingots, the entire pile wrapping around her and forming thick metal armor around her. It was an intimidating sight, a cross between a T-1000 and a massive golem.

"And you think I'm ready to start learning that anytime soon?" I asked skeptically.

"Hell no!" She said, her voice muffled before suddenly the metal peeled off around her face. "Even its first form, which is a much more brutal version, is not something you're ready to learn."

"Then why are you showing it to me?"

"To give you a look at what you could eventually learn," She explained. "I consider this to be one of the pinnacles of metal bending, and it will probably be the last thing I teach you."

She moved, taking a stance and thrusting downward, the armor peeling off of her, the sound of straining metal filling the training pit until she stepped out of the crumpled metal pile.

"Alright, *now* that's everything!" She said. "See you soon, Mopey!"

Before I could respond, she kicked out a metal ingot, which slapped me in the chest. Before the impact could even hurt, I was back in the real world, falling off of my seat, patting my chest to make sure it wasn't caved in from a flying slab of metal.

"Fucking hell... I'm going to get her back for that next time I see her," I grumbled to myself as I stood up, stretching my back out.

I made my way back upstairs to the main area, heading right for bed, ready for some much-needed sleep.