

Eventually Toph, or whatever she was, got sick of me staring at her and saying nothing. She kicked her foot forward almost casually and a slab of rock rose under my backside hard enough to launch me to my feet. I couldn't help but yelp at the sudden movement.

"Enough of that slack jawed stuff!" She said. "I was created specifically to help you get better, so that's what we are going to do!"

She turned and walked away, heading for the nearest pile of rocks. Hesitating for a moment I followed after her, rubbing my now sore ass.

"Wait... So you're completely artificial?" I asked after her. "They didn't copy the original soul or frankenstein you from the dead or anything like that?"

"No Mopey, I am a completely artificial construct specifically designed to mimic what you think Toph Beifong would be like and stuffed with earthbending knowledge and teaching methods. That includes things only Toph would know." She explained, completely unphased by what she was saying, for a moment not sounding like Toph at all. "I'm a Siri with sarcasm and sass."

"Alright... well I'm glad they didn't stick their hands into the real Toph's life." I said with a slight sigh of relief. "They really fucked up mine. I appreciate that I'm not dead but..."

Toph said nothing, looking at me with a raised eyebrow, face unmoving. It seemed almost like she was done responding to things that didn't have to do with earthbending. I let out a sigh and shook my head. I paused for a moment and just looked back at her, letting the silence extend for what felt like a few minutes before throwing my hands up.

"Fine! Okay, show me how to earthbend." I said defeatedly

"First, show me what you can do!" She said as if she had just been paused.

For what felt like the next few hours I showed the artificial construct the limits of what I could do. Lifting, pushing, stomping, punching and kicking rocks until I was completely drained. I managed to make it to one of the smaller boulders to sit on, my legs more than a bit shaky.

"Not bad for a newbie." Toph said, having been observing and making sarcastic remarks the entire time. "I think I have a pretty good idea on what you can do."

I nodded, silently listening as I caught my breath, using my shirt to wipe the sweat from my eyes. Just like I had started to learn outside in the real world, while my supersoldier abilities helped, earthbending required energy from a different source than my modified endurance. I could already feel myself recovering, but it wasn't an infinite well like it felt my ability to run was.

Toph dropped down to a cross legged seated position before flinging out her arm and knocking away the small boulder I was sitting on. I took the hint and sat cross legged in front of her.

“The first thing you need to understand is that there are no official levels or any of that crap. At some point people just start referring to you as a master earthbender.” She explained. “I’m not going to clap you on the back when you’ve completed my final test and declare you an official earthbending master.”

I nodded, remembering from the cartoon that the closest thing to that was a crappy earthbending academy that reeked of strip mall dojo.

“The second thing you need to learn is what separates a newbie from a master. There are some specifics while others are more broad. Things like bending control, endurance, flexibility and adaptability. Bending endurance and control are pretty straight forward and will improve over time, especially if you practice outside of here. Flexibility and adaptability are heavily tied together and involve how you use your bending.”

I nodded, my body recovering as I listened to what the construct was saying, nodding along as she spoke.

“Normally we would have to work on things like fitness and strength as well, but you clearly don’t need that. Though I will be teaching you basic forms. The best earth benders may use their own style and movements but they are still a good way to learn. Which leads into the last thing, abilities and techniques. These are things like the true Toph’s seismic sense, sandbending, mudbending, earth armor, earth running, and many more. These are difficult to self teach but not impossible. Some will come easy to you, some will be more difficult and some you will be unable to learn no matter how hard you try. We know metal bending is at least possible for you, while lava bending is probably impossible.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why are some techniques easy, some hard and some impossible?”

“It comes down to how you think.” She explained. “What makes you, you. While we may be able to flex and train our minds to think differently, truly changing or altering how we think is something that would take decades of mental training and unparalleled discipline or...”

“...Or what?” I ask after waiting a few moments, hoping for a way to learn Lava bending as well.

“Or continuous real trauma that breaks you into someone else.” She answered. “Though some are immune to even that. Some people are just too flexible or stable to break.”

“Oh. Yeah that’s not realistic at all.”

“No kidding Mopey.” She responded, rolling her gray-green eyes. “As I was saying, most of these techniques are easier to learn from someone who already knows them. Some of them will be so easy for you that you might pick them up by yourself.”

“Is there any way to know which ones would be easier for me?” I asked, quickly adding when she gave me a harsh look. “Not to take the easy road, but because if I’m going to take the Justice League up on their offer it would be good to have a few more tricks up my sleeve.”

“We could go over some broader techniques and methods soon, see if anything sticks.” She explained. “For now I’m going to teach you a way to practice control.”

She stood up and stomped her foot, a single rough sphere of rock the size of a small watermelon thumping up from the ground. With a grunt she caught it one handed, palming it in front of herself.

“Control is the ability to change and manipulate your bending on a small scale.” She explained. “Any braindead grunt can push and shove boulders. It takes skill and practice to do small detailed bending.”

She raised her free hand and slapped it against the stone. Rock shards and dirt scattered from the rock as she slapped it, more as she repeated the move half a dozen more times all around the stone chunk. When she was done the once rough and oddly shaped chunk of rock was a perfect looking sphere. When she was done she threw it to me, letting me examine the solid stone.

“Working on being precise will allow you to more easily control your bending, making advanced techniques and abilities easier to grasp.”

After letting me examine it for a few moments she gestured for me to throw it back, catching it with ease when I did. Holding it one handed once again she pushed her finger against the side. With seemingly hardly any force her finger pushed into the stone, slowly carving a swirling pattern into the surface. Fine sand fell away from her finger as she carved a steadily more complicated series of patterns into the sphere. When she was done she held it out for me to see.

“Eventually you will be able to do this.” She said. “Well, eventually if you’re not a lazy bones. Now give it a shot.”

I nodded and stomped my foot, popping a chunk of stone from the ground. However, where the construct’s rock had already been rounded a bit, mine was just a chunk of stone. I frowned but began shaping it, knocking off the more egregious outcroppings before raising my free hand and slapping it, trying my best to round it out. Instead what I got was a flattened side, small fragments of rocks scattering away. I frowned and rotated the rock, trying again, this time focusing on trying to create a rounded edge. Frowning deeper when I flattened the other side.

“What are you doing?” Toph asked, stepping close to look at what I did.

“I’m envisioning the rounded edge and pushing the energy into it.” I said, still frowning.

“No, that won’t work for something like that.” She explained. “Sure you can shove boulders like that but for something so precise you need to envision what the energy will be doing, not just on what you want the end result to be.”

I frowned and was about to ask another question when a familiar voice echoed through my head.

“Warren?” M’gann’s voice said. “Warren, are you okay?”

I look around, seeing no one else in this... whatever this was. I looked back at the construct who looked mildly annoyed but shrugged.

“Keep practicing this when you’re outside. Don’t come back until you have an almost perfect sphere! We can go over the carving method and maybe some endurance training techniques the next time you meditate.” She said with a wave. “Bye Mopey!”

Before I could say anything in response the world blinked, and suddenly I was sitting back on the flattened boulder. It was dark out, and the air was much cooler than it had been when I had sat down. I turned to look at M’gann, who was gently squeezing my shoulder.

“I... I’m okay.” I said, shaking my head to clear up the cobwebs. “I was just meditating.”

“Really? You felt so far away.” She said, before wincing and quickly correcting herself. “Sorry, I know that you hate people in your head but I promise I didn’t go deep, just surface thoughts!”

I smile and put my hand on her shoulder, giving her a reassuring squeeze before stretching and sliding off of the boulder.

“It’s okay. It’s not the psychic being in my head that scares me to be honest. It’s what they could do while they are there. You’re fine, I trust you for the surface level stuff.” I explained while stretching the rest of my kinks out. “What time is it?”

“It’s one in the morning.” She answered. “The others already left, I volunteered to stay and keep an eye on you.”

“Thank you M’gann, I appreciate that.” I said honestly. “I feel a bit better.”

“Do... do you want to talk about it?” She asked tentatively.

I shrugged and started making my way down the walkway to the warehouse, M'gann floating alongside me.

"Not much to talk about. I'm still me, but some of me is different." I said, sitting down on the basic stone chair I had made. "It's going to take a bit to get used to."

I was underselling the amount of panic and nihilism I was feeling at the moment, but I didn't want to freak the Martian too much. Then again she could probably feel at least some of it, but I gave her a small smile. When she returned it I happened to look over her shoulder, noticing her Bioship was still sitting in the clearing.

"How did they get home?" I asked, looking around. "I can't imagine your uncle flew them all back."

"N-no..." She answered, before trailing off. "I think it's supposed to be a secret? Sorry but..."

"Hmmm? Oh, if it's supposed to be members only I can understand." I assured her. "I understand the importance of OpSec."

"OpSec?"

"Operational Security." I answered. "Basically how things are kept secret but still functional. A secret is easy to keep if no one knows it, but you need to work at it and set a lot of rules and guidelines if you want to keep something you actively use secret."

"Oh, I see." Miss Martian nodded, looking up at the sky. "Secrets are a lot different on Earth than they are on Mars."

"How so?" I asked, genuinely interested.

"Well we are a psychically connected people. Unless someone is a master of telepathy and mindfulness we can tell when someone is hiding something." She explained. "Sure it's impolite to probe and take a peek, but it's hard to hide that your hiding something."

"Isn't that... Invasive?"

"Martian minds are built differently from humans. They have an entirely different feel. Being connected is a part of us."

"So how does being here feel?" I asked, looking back at her.

"It is... Very quiet." She admitted. "I talk constantly with Bioship, though it's more images and feelings with her. My uncle stays in contact a lot as well. As long as I talk to people a lot it is manageable."

“So I'm guessing that it's like a mix of being touch starved and conversation starved.” I surmised. “That... I can't imagine that's good for you.”

“Like I said, it's manageable... Sometimes I get a bit over excited when I'm talking to people though. It's nothing bad!” She assured me, a bit too eagerly. “ I'm just glad that Uncle explained just how much people might not like talking telepathically. I thought I understood but apparently I didn't really fully get it.”

“What brought that conversation on?”

“We were actually discussing you. He mentioned not to make mental contact with you at all, no matter what. He was worried you would react poorly to it. He felt my answer wasn't serious enough and went into greater detail.”

“Ah, well at least you understand now.”

“Yes, and I am very glad I do.” She said emphatically, shivering slightly. “He related it to going many layers deep into a Martian's mind, past what they show to even friends and family, all without permission.”

“I can imagine that's bad.”

“Yeah, really bad.”

We were quiet for a while, enjoying the relatively cool summer night, the moon in the sky and the stars plentiful this far away from the city. Internally I wrestled with a moral quandary.

“How bad is it really?” I asked softly.

“It... it's manageable but not good.” She admitted hesitantly. “It feels like sensory deprivation, when my uncle isn't around it feels like the world is silent.”

“How does he handle it?”

“My uncle is a bit of a special case. He doesn't feel it as deeply as I do.”

“...What does communicating telepathically entail? Just surface level right?”

“Oh, it's even less than that.” She explained distractedly. “It's like reading the cover of a book. You can't see what's inside but you can usually get a good idea of what's going on.”

“Would talking to me like that help?” I asked, giving her a small smile. “As long as it's actually how you described.”

“Oh! Warren, I couldn't ask you to do that.” She said, now focused back on me. “You hated what Uncle did to look into your mind.”

“Yeah, because that was super invasive.” I pointed out. “This doesn't sound bad. Besides, it would be pretty useful, especially when we are working together.”

For a long moment M'gann looked like she was going to turn down my offer. But suddenly I had my arms full of Martian, getting a big hug that made my back crack. I hugged her in return, a smile on my face.

*“Thank you so much!”* She said, or thought to me. *“But I- Oh!”*

She pulled back, now floating in front of me, sitting on air. She was even blushing. As she pulled away I could still feel her, like she was pressed against me still, kind of mentally.

“Are you... “ I stopped, focusing for a moment. *“Are you giving me a mental hug?”*

*“No, more like sitting really close.”* She explained, a smile coming through, matching her physical one. *“It's good that you could guess that close though. Means you're sensitive to telepathy. You would probably feel it if someone tried to dig deeper.”*

*“How do you know that?”*

*“Ummm... it's when a toddler can start telling when someone is touching their mind deeper.”* She admitted, fidgeting nervously

*“So... You're saying that I'm mentally a toddler then?”* I said, raising an eyebrow. I also tried my best to convey the idea of it through my thoughts.

*“No! I was just-”*

I cut her off by chuckling, shaking my head. *“It's fine, I'm just teasing you.”*

She blushed, floating back down to the other chair. We sat together in the quiet, both verbally and mentally. I could still feel her though. I had to admit... It was comforting. Extremely odd, but comforting. It still made me nervous though, a whisper in the back of my mind that she was somewhere she wasn't supposed to be, that she was rummaging through my thoughts. Suppressing a smirk I realized I could test it. Rapid fire I called to mind several less than child friendly images, most of them pornstars in compromising positions. After about thirty seconds of this I peaked over at M'gann, finding a simple and innocent smile on her face.

That was good enough for now.

*"Wait! You said when we are working together!" She said excitedly. "Does that mean you're joining the team?"*

*"Yeah, it should be interesting, the training will be interesting and it's an opportunity to do good. Plus I'm kind of struggling with my displaced status. I'm hoping that if I join the league will help with that."*

*"I'm sure they would help either way." She pointed out. "But this is so exciting! Another member already! I can't wait to introduce you to everyone!"*

I couldn't help but smile at her excitement, it was infectious. I could even feel it through her presence in my mind, and I tried to push my own excitement into it. When I did she turned to me, her smile even bigger.

*"I felt that! Having you around more is going to help me relax so much!"*

*"I'm looking forward to it." I agreed before standing up and stretching. "It's getting even later, I shouldn't be keeping you up like this."*

*"Oh! It's no problem. Martians don't need to sleep!" She explained. "Or eat, though we do both for enjoyment."*

*"Well... I suppose we could stargaze for a little bit longer."*