

Once everyone had recovered from the shock of finding yet another Superman clone everything became very busy. The original Roy Harper and the Superman clone were both carefully transferred out of the facility. Roy was taken to a League approved medical facility to reattach what remained of his hand, escorted by Green Arrow and Black Canary. Meanwhile the Superman clone was transferred into an empty stasis vessel, before being escorted out of the facility by his fellow Kryptonians, as well as Green Lantern, who used his ring to transport the new stasis pod to Superman's Fortress of Solitude, with the big blue boy scout carrying Superboy.

Of course this was after I stopped him, pointing out that Superboy was a minor and would need permission to just disappear for such a long time. Superman panicked and disappeared in a blur, only to reappear a moment later and admit he didn't know where Superboy lived, so he couldn't ask his guardians. I think Batman took pity on the Kryptonian and agreed to explain the situation to Kyle's guardians, instead of pointing out a fancy new thing called cell phones.

Once the both of the Cadmus victims had been moved from the storage facility, the rest of us continued our exploration. We went pod by pod, wiping each on to see inside, with Wonder Woman joining us underground to help search the higher rows.

Eventually we finished searching through the entire facility. Only one other pod stood out, an alien "sample" that was still alive, the species of which J'onn didn't recognize. The incredibly human looking alien was clearly wounded, with some sort of burn wrapping around their torso and left arm. The damage was bad enough that J'onn was worried about waking them up, which would have already been risky if they seemed perfectly healthy as we had no idea how their species would react to being in stasis. Instead, they were carted away and brought to a secure facility, where they could be studied. Hopefully they would be able to figure out how we could help them. While I was well aware that appearances could be deceiving when it came to aliens, they looked young, around the rest of my team's age.

With the storage facility explored completely, the New Titans eventually returned to the cave, leaving fresh Justice League reinforcements and the police to secure the facility. Roy was gone, having been taken somewhere more comfortable, kept sedated until a more calm setting could be created for them. It wasn't exactly the best solution but everyone agreed that they would need support and time, neither of which were completely available as their mentor was busy with the original.

Eventually Batman returned as well, debriefing us and congratulating us.

"This was as successful as we could have hoped for, despite how... wildly beyond expectations the truth behind Speedy's aberrant behavior was," He assured us. "This could have gone a lot worse, and your contribution was in no way small. You have once again proven yourselves."

The tension in the cave had been high, the mission still weighing heavily on Robin, Wally and Kaldur. Still, a complement from Batman was no small thing, and the tension in the room lessened slightly.

“The original Roy Harper is stable, and the doctors are hopeful that his arm will reattach, as the stasis tech kept it in near perfect condition.”

“About that sir,” I said, the dark hero focusing on me. “Is there any way we could get access to one or more of those pods?”

“Why?” He asked simply.

“Well they would make near perfect emergency triage pods, in case someone is severely injured out on a mission,” I explained. “According to M’gann, Bioship can adapt to some types of new tech. Since they will likely be our most frequent deployment asset, I wanted to see if it was possible for them to copy it. Even if that doesn’t work it’s still handy tech to have on hand.”

“Well thought out,” Batman admitted with a nod. “Miss Martian, would Bioship be capable of adapting the technology?”

“She would be at least able to power it,” M’gann said, nodding along with the idea. “As long as it doesn’t take any exotic energy sources or materials to run. As for replicating it... I won’t know until she tries, sorry.”

“Understood, I will have two empty pods delivered within the next few days,” Batman agreed with a nod. “Now for the rest of the debriefing...”

We continued to discuss the last few days, going over the capture of Sportsmaster, the interrogation, and the dive into Cadmus. Eventually Batman revealed that Guardian, who was apparently a hero that Cadmus used to protect their facility, was also a clone of Roy Harper, the first test subject of their early cloning process.

After the debriefing was done Wally returned home and the rest of the team decided to call it an early night. We had a quick dinner before M’gann, Kaldur and Robin headed off to bed. I however stayed up and headed down into the grotto. I had been practicing during almost all of my down time, but it had been a while since I had last meditated.

At this point I could manage what Toph wanted, which was being able to turn a huge chunk of stone into sand, as well as manipulate that sand in rudimentary ways. It was a bit more than what she had asked for but once I figured out a few tricks, mostly that the crumbling effect would propagate further from my strikes if I soaked the stone with extra energy, either through my first strike or by reaching out to it, it became much easier to do.

I quickly climbed onto my meditation platform and closed my eyes, settling into the familiar rhythm of breathing and letting my energy and awareness of the stone around me spread out. I let out a long slow breath... and got knocked on my ass by a blast of sand.

“C’mon Mopey! Time to show me what you learned!” Toph shouted while laughing.

I tilted my head to look at her, my eyes going wide before I slap the ground, a wave of rock spinning me up and to my feet, dodging another torrent of sand. The construct continued to blast me, forcing me to earth bend the sand away from myself, solidifying it back into stone.

“Well that’s a good sign, what else you got?”

Toph and I sparred for a few hours in the large sandpit, focusing mostly on sand bending. I did my best to learn as we fought, trying to replicate several of the things she was doing. Eventually she called the spar to a halt.

“Not bad. I could have bulldozed you if I wanted to but that wasn’t bad,” She said, stomping her foot and solidifying almost the entire sand pit. “Now let’s test your limits.”

She stomped her other foot and almost casually launched a chunk of stone at me. Instinctively I reached up, put my hand up and redirected it with a combination of strength and earth bending. The artificial construct clicked her tongue and shook her head.

“I’m testing your sandbending Mopey, not your earth bending basics,” She corrected, before immediately launching another chunk of stone at me.

This time I was more prepared and had a bit more time to focus. When the stone reached me I lashed out with a punch, the stone turning to sand and spraying back at me, blasting me in the face.

“Agg! My eyes!” I cried out, spitting out sand as well.

I could hear Toph laughing at my misfortune.

When I eventually finished washing the sand and dirt out of my eyes, using a few buckets of water that seemed to pop into existence from nowhere, Toph slid back into teaching mode.

“I couldn’t have demonstrated the danger and advantage of using sand bending better if I had tried,” She said with a laugh. “It’s unpredictable, hard to work and energy intensive. However, it makes it great to take someone down non lethally. Not everyone is built as tough as benders, especially in a world without them.”

“Wait, benders are tougher than normal people?” I asked, still blinking weirdly and brushing sand out of my clothes.

“Of course we are, have you seen King Bumi? The man was built like a platypus bear even when he was ancient! Anyone who manipulates chi benefits from it, even if they aren't doing it consciously.” She said with a shrug. “I'm not here to tutor you on that so my understanding is weak at best, but yes, chi users are naturally stronger and tougher than normal people. You have just started scratching the surface because you are still new to this, but you'll start noticing it eventually. At least if you're paying attention.”

Before I could ask any more questions Toph smacked another chunk of rock at me and I was forced to go on the defensive. Instead of shattering this one I redirected it again, only this time I turned it to sand after it was already past me. Then I carried it around and behind me, compacting it into a clod of sand and launching it back at Toph.

“Good! You don't shove sand around like you do rock, you redirect it, guide it. You're still in charge but now you're a conductor, not a sledge hammer!”

Two more rocks fired at me from across the arena, one after the other. Again I brought the first one to the side, turning it to sand before guiding it back around and using it to push the second rock to the side. It caused a spray of sand to go everywhere, which blocked my vision but was too far away to reach me. Before the sand could drop to the ground a final rock blasted through. I reached out to redirect and fire it back but instead, as the stone hit my hand, the outer shell crumbled. What I had thought was another stone was in fact a thin shell containing sand, which went around my redirect and slammed into my chest. Luckily, this time, I managed to close my eyes before the resulting explosion of sand got to them. I was, however, knocked down and back a few feet, hitting the ground with a thud.

“Sand lets you do some fancy stuff. Some earth benders complain it's not pure earthbending but in my opinion it's too useful to pass up,” Toph said with a smirk.

I nodded in agreement, slowly standing back up with a groan.

We practiced for another hour, Toph firing chunks of rock and blasts of sand, which I used sand bending to redirect or dodge. Eventually I fell into a rhythm and my brain started working on an idea. I was about half way through it when Toph stopped.

“I recognize that face, just like Twinkle Toes' when he was about to make a breakthrough,” She said with a big grin. “What do you need, Mopey?”

At my request, Toph quickly set up a half dozen thin stone targets in an arc in front of me while I practiced. I had an idea, one for an attack that would stun, incapacitate and disorient, not do any lethal damage, all while obscuring myself. I worked on it for twenty minutes before finally giving it a shot.

With a shout I bent my left leg slightly and swept my right around in a low kick. Instead of kicking though, my foot gouged into the ground, digging into the stone and creating a high wave of sand, completely obscuring me from the dummies point of view. I lashed out with a barrage of punches, my fist slamming into the sand as it followed its own momentum, my earth bending trying to reach out... and failing. The sand fell to the ground, settling into a high pile.

Undeterred I tried again after patching the gouge in the ground with the sand, bending it back into its solid form. This time I was able to gather the sand a bit better, but I wasn't quite fast enough for it to be effective.

I tried about a dozen more times, taking Toph's advice when she offered it. Eventually I got everything together, figured out each movement and the energy required before trying it again.

I bent my left leg much further than I had the first time, which let me really dig my foot into the stone, kicking up a huge amount of sand. Instead of immediately trying to punch it, I followed through with my sweeping not kick, raising my knee up to reinforce the sand rising up into the air. Following through I leaned forward, adding momentum to fire out three punches into the rising sand. Each punch pulsed out my chi, gathering the sand together before firing out the other side of the floating sand wall. The gathered sand fired into three targets, smashing into them with enough force to knock the free standing dummies over.

As a final finish I continued with my forward momentum, even enhancing it with an earthen wave to blast through the now falling wall of sand, sending a Warren sized wave of it crashing into a fourth target, knocking it down as well.

"Not bad!" Toph called out from a stone bench behind me. "That final move is a bit over the top but the punches should be effective. Let's practice on some moving targets!"

With the general idea hammered out, Toph and I spent another two hours refining the idea, hammering it out into an actual technique. I soon realized that Toph was partially right, the final wave was a bit much unless I was looking to rush a target, as I could use the sand to obscure my actions until I could launch myself forward.

I also learned that I could at max fire four blasts of sand before I ran out of time and most of it fell back to the ground.

Eventually I was at the point where I could hit a standing target almost a hundred percent of the time and was a least winging moving targets at least seventy five percent.

"I like it," Toph said as we sat down, taking a break. "It's going to be useful when you're facing people you can't smash with actual rocks. Plus the barrage part is flexible to use anywhere. Just keep practicing to get the moving target accuracy up."

“Thanks, I’ll add it to the list.” I said with a serious nod. “What else do you want to cover today?”

“I want to get you started on the ground layer of earthen armor,” She answered, standing up from the bench. “Once you get the basic technique down you can practice on your own. This is your last thing you absolutely should know before you can start metal bending training. There are a bunch of things you should *probably* know, but this is the last thing you really should.”

Toph stepped next to a large pillar of stone and slammed her fist into it, all the way up to her shoulder, before pulling it back out, her limb now covered in stone armor. It flexed and buckled as she moved and waved her arm in a way that was very reminiscent of the earthen wave.

“Now I’m not sure if this is bullet proof, I don’t really have much to compare guns to save arrows,” Toph pointed out, flicking her hand and removing her stone armor. “Now, tell me why I’m teaching you this now, instead of before.”

“... it uses principles of sand bending and earthen wave?” I asked, pretty confident I was right.

“That’s right, although sand bending only helps in forming the armor, it’s not actually necessary,” Toph confirmed, before gesturing for me to stand up. “Now, I want you to make some sand and pull it around your hand.”

Toph carefully instructed me in how to pull stone gravel and sand around my hand. My first few attempts left my hand stuck in a giant ball of sand or gravel, but I eventually formed a uniform shell around my hand. Toph showed me the difference between using gravel and sand, or even larger stones, all three of which I could now shift between since I had gotten a firm grip on sand bending.

The next step was easy, all I had to do was imbue the stone with my chi in the same way I did when I was preparing the earth for earthen waves or any of the similar techniques. But instead of following up with direction, I let the energy sit, forcing the stone to shift around my hand as I made a fist. I obviously lost a lot of dexterity when the stone was at any useful thickness, but it was still flexible enough for me to move and shift my hand around.

“This is my own improved version of earthen armor, one I didn’t complete until I became a hermit. The addition of sand bending greatly increases its flexibility,” Toph explained. “Without it, using rock as body armor leaves you slow and vulnerable to high powered attacks.”

I let the armor fall away, gravel and chunks of stone falling to the ground. I immediately reformed it, this time gathering the armor up to my elbow. It was harder to concentrate on, but I could manage it.

“Controlling and using it will get easier over time,” Toph assured me. “But if you master this you are one major step closer to learning metal bending. For now, I think you've been here long enough. Goodbye!”

I turned to look at the artificial construct, only for a blast of sand to slam into my chest. I flailed around and fell backwards, once again tumbling off of my meditation platform.

“God dammit,” I said, still laying on the ground. “I should have seen that coming.”

Eventually I pulled myself up off the ground and made my way to my room. I collapsed into my bed and fell asleep almost instantly.