

The next morning we woke up at our usual time, though M'gann had to wake up Tora, who had apparently slept through her alarm. She was embarrassed and more than a little frazzled, but she calmed down after a few minutes. Once she had we started our morning workout, with M'gann and Tora starting on their cardio. M'gann was determined to work on her weakest point and so far had made some solid improvements. Wally and Robin did resistance training and Kaldur worked on a simple set of battle ropes off to the side.

Unfortunately with my cast, I was stuck doing light leg exercises. My arm felt fine, and I could have obviously busted it off with no issue, especially since I could feel the plaster reacting to my earthbending energy. However, I wasn't dumb enough to think that just because my arm felt fine that I was ready for a full work out. Besides, I was seeing the doctors again today, hopefully, they would agree it was time to remove it.

After a few hours of working out, we all split off to rinse off and get dressed, meeting back up at the kitchen for breakfast. After a quick meal of muffins, homemade by M'gann, we headed to the main hall.

"Alright. I've got a doctor's appointment. Hopefully, when I get back it will be without this thing," I said, waving my cast around. "I should be back before, but apologize to Batman and our new instructor if I end up being late."

With some confirmations from Kaldur and Robin, I headed through the Zeta-Tube and off to the League-approved doctor's office. The office was nearby a normal Zeta Tube and had apparently been briefed by the League, and was where a lot of the human or human adjacent heroes went when they needed discreet treatment. I'm not sure how it worked as they basically didn't ask any questions, but they seemed happy to treat us after Santa Prisca, and didn't ask for money or insurance.

My visit didn't take very long, considering they needed to get an X-ray. I think I saved a chunk of time by tapping my cast twice and popping it open with a bit of earthbending, surprising the nurse who had been reaching for some sort of saw.

After confirming that my arm was completely healed, but extracting a promise from me that I would stick to light work for the next few days, the doctor let me go and I headed straight back to the cave.

When I stepped out of the Zeta-Tube the team was just finishing up sparring, Tora getting shoved out of bounds by Robin. I stepped closed and looked around, spotting the clumps of ice that hung from the ceiling and stuck to the walls. M'gann turned to smile at me, though I could feel through our connection that she had been feeling a bit nervous about being alone. Better than her usual panic, but still something to work on.

"You know... We might want to split up our sparring into powered and non-powered," I said, getting Wally and Kaldur's attention. "Not people, but the kind of techniques we use."

“To get more experience in case we are rendered powerless?” Kaldur asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Partly. But more importantly, it's difficult to go all out for a few of us if we are somewhere breaking shit isn't okay.”

“We could always make a pit of sand for you,” Wally suggested. “And maybe add some water for Kaldur?”

“That's... a good idea,” I commented, calling to mind the disks of stone in the pro-bending scenes from Korra. “I could probably do that pretty easily assuming there is space...”

I reached down into the ground with my earthbending energy, feeling out the infrastructure that was buried in the floor. There were sensors and scanners embedded in the ground, but they were set up in a grid pattern, and I could easily set in two concentric trenches around them, as well as inset some stone plates.

“I'll ask Batman to confirm digging a trench or two wouldn't somehow throw everything off,” I continued after a moment of rubbing my chin in thought. “Good call Wally.”

Wally accepted the compliment with a nod, all three of us turning to greet Robin and Tora. M'gann landed beside me and gave me a hug, which I eagerly returned.

*“We need to talk to the group about you forming a light connection with them,”* I thought to her. *“I love having a special connection with you but it feels like you need more of a safety net.”*

*“They didn't like the idea before,”* She pointed out. *“Why would they have changed their minds at this point?”*

*“They've accepted the mind talking at least, that's a good solid step,”* I responded. *“We can bring it up later. They may surprise you.”*

“Are you two alright?” Tora asked, catching M'gann and me by surprise.

“They are talking psychically,” Robin explained, chuckling when the cryokinetic looked at him with wide eyes. “Martians are psychic. It's come in handy a few times.”

“Can she read my mind?” Tora asked quietly, though M'gann clearly still heard her.

“I could, but I wouldn't. At least not without permission,” She assured her. “There are different levels and it's hard to explain, but maybe we could go over it later?”

Tora looked a bit concerned, but took a deep breath and nodded, standing up straight before looking around.

“So what’s next?” She asked.

“Now we wait a bit for Batman to drop off our new instructor,” I explained. “It’s only eleven am, he said they would show up sometime in the early afternoon. I’m going to spend some time earthbending down in the grotto.”

We all went our separate ways, with M’gann and Tora heading to spend some time with Bioship. I assumed that they were also talking about how M’gann’s mind-reading works. Wally, Robin, and Kaldur all headed to the living room.

When I got down to the grotto I started by doing some stretching, mostly just to get a feel for how my arm felt. It was a little tight, but there was no pain or soreness, which was great. I was still going to take it physically easy for the rest of the day though.

I started small, working the stone and sand up around my legs, jogging and jumping around the cavern as I worked on keeping my energy output even and my control tight. While I worked on trying to get that control as instinctual as possible, so I wouldn’t need to focus on it as much during a fight, I tried to figure out a way to get the stone and sand over my entire body.

My first thought was to do what the Toph construct had done, so I summoned a wall of stone and tried to pull it around myself as I leaned against it. I had some success, but it was taking too long. The process took almost fifteen seconds at first, as I broke some of the stone down into sand, wrapped it around myself, and pulled the stone out on top of it. I managed to get it down to ten seconds with some work, but that was still not nearly fast enough for my taste.

Eventually, after some more practice of getting my entire body covered, I had a bit of an epiphany. I flicked away all of the armor I had on myself before putting my arms out and leaning back, letting myself fall backward. As I fell I softened the ground as much as I could using the same process as earthen wave, pushing it until it was sand, but helping it flow around me as I landed, both to soften the impact and help it form up around me.

I thrust my arms forward, keeping the sand around myself and using the stone beneath me to push me back upright, feeding energy into the sand to harden it, creating plates of earth armor around my entire body.

I shouted out and jumped up, keeping the armor around me the entire time. I ran around the grotto, jumping, flipping, and generally testing the armor around me, getting a feel for how it changed my weight and flexibility. It was heavy and restrictive, but the sand kept my movement from being restricted to much, and my enhanced strength kept the weight from overwhelming me.

I made my way to the water's edge and looked down into it, the reflection looking back up at me looking intimidating, like some sort of earthen golem. The sand shifted and moved as I did, while the stone plates on top stayed mostly in place, locked by the energy I was infusing it with.

I needed to test this against bullets as soon as possible.

By the time I finally released the stone and sand, letting it all fall to the ground, I had worked up the start of a sweat from the heavy armor and the constant use of my bending energy. The armor required some focus to keep going, but I could feel it getting easier to keep up with less and less concentration. Shaking the last bits of earth from my clothes I took a few minutes to recover, before heading back to the living area.

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About twenty minutes after I finished training in the grotto, I got a message from Batman that he would be arriving shortly. A quick walk around the base and I managed to find everyone, getting them back to the main cave. Only a few minutes later the Zeta-Tube started spinning up, eventually flashing brightly before revealing Batman and a second person.

The second man was an older gentleman, maybe around fifty, with graying black hair and a grizzled beard. He had a scar that ran along his face, crossing his brow all the way down to the opposite cheek. It was old, clearly, but plenty visible, and crossed a serious boxer's nose. He also walked with a noticeable limp, leaning on a simple wooden, curved cane.

"New Titans, I'd like to introduce you to retired Colonel Marcus Clidan. He served in the United States Military Corps for over thirty years before retiring three years ago, due to progressing issues with an old injury," Batman explained, the man simply nodding as he studied each of us. "He will be your instructor for now, and will be using his contacts to find you a suitable stealth instructor."

The man took a few steps forward, but remained silent, focusing on each of us before eventually nodding.

"It's good to meet you all. I have to admit, when Batman came to me with your request, I had to pause for a moment to consider it. Meta-Humans trained in squad tactics and stealth is either a military dream or a nightmare. If I'm honest, I'm not sure which one."

"Sir, not to offend, but I wasn't expecting a colonel when Batman agreed to find us an instructor," I said, looking between him and Batman.

"Originally I contacted Colonel Clidan because I expected him to have someone in mind for the position," Batman explained.

“But the idea got stuck in my head. It has merit and I am interested in how it will be executed,” The older man explained, thumping the floor with his cane. “I decided to come out of retirement for a while, see if I couldn't teach some new blood some old tricks.”

“Colonel Clidan is a decorated war veteran who started in Special Forces. He has the experience that could prove vital in your training,” Batman explained, staring us all down. “I don't have to tell you all to take his lessons seriously.”

Without another word Batman turned and stepped back into the Zeta-Tube, disappearing in a flash of light. All of us, including Colonel Clidan, turned to watch him leave. When he was gone the retired veteran nodded and turned back to us.

“Before we start discussing anything, I think it's only fair to admit that this is going to be a learning experience for everyone involved, myself included,” He admitted, walking to and through our group, making his to a nearby bench, right outside where we sparred before sitting down.

“How so, Sir?” I asked as we all followed him.

“The military functions on baselines and replicable strength,” He explained, sitting down and stretching his leg with a wince. “Soldiers are singular parts of a greater whole, even those that are particularly skilled. Obviously, that's an oversimplification, but the point still stands. The problem is that your abilities are multifaceted and unique. Not only would it be a waste of potential for any of you to focus on one aspect of your power simply because we need you to fit a specific role, but none of you match the basic roles the military uses. Not to mention none of you are using firearms.”

The colonel paused for a moment, pulling out a cigar from a pocket, chewing the tip, and lighting it. After the cigar was properly started he took a puff before continuing.

“I spent a few days thinking about it, trying to bridge the gap between the difference between a modern soldier and a meta-human hero, before realizing that this is all completely new ground!” He explained excitedly, taking another puff of his cigar. “The closest anyone has gotten to this concept is the assassin squads trained by the League of Shadows. But even they focus on cookie-cutter warriors, not unique meta-humans.”

“So... What's your plan then?” Wally asked, continuing once Robin slapped his head. “Uh... Sir.”

“My plan is to start from the beginning. or near to it.” Colonel Cladin explained, standing up, his cigar in his lips. “I have read all of your files and talked to most of your mentors, we stand a fair shake of figuring this out.”

I couldn't help but frown, despite the fact that I understood where he was coming from. What we were looking for was, as far as I could tell, a relatively new thing. I could vaguely remember some examples of people in Steve's memories that attempted something similar, but most of them were human plus villain groups. Still, I was hoping these lessons would be challenging because of the content, not because we were breaking new ground.

"For now, I want to see you fight, I've read about your abilities in your files but I would like to get a better idea about your capabilities," He said, leaning on his cane and looking around. "I was under the impression there was a sparring ring somewhere here in this room?"

Kaldur and I nodded, quickly setting up the sparring ring projectors, despite the fact that everyone had already sparred today, besides myself. We set up a quick dozen rounds, letting everyone show off a bit and demonstrate our strengths. I did explain that we would be better off doing this somewhere we could cut loose, and where I could access stone safely, but Colonel Cladin assured me there would be plenty of time for that, he was just observing our style.

We spent the rest of the day sparring, Colonel Cladin eventually calling an end to the impromptu extra session. He explained that he would be back tomorrow at noon sharp and that we should be waiting for him. He left after that, leaving the rest of us sharing looks, and M'gann sending out waves of confusion.

"Robin... has Batman ever mentioned him?" I asked, looking over at the young hero.

"Yeah, his name's come up a few times," He responded. "Batman saved him and his career a while back before I was Robin. I've never met him before though."

"I'm not the only one who was... underwhelmed then?" Wally asked.

"I... Don't believe it's his fault," Kaldur said. "There is no reason to doubt his competency, especially as he comes with Batman's recommendation. What we are trying to do is new, it makes sense that we would have to start from the beginning and build from there."

"Yeah. I was hoping for a bit more but looking back I should have seen this coming," I admitted. "We will wait through a few more sessions. If it feels like he is floundering... We might need to give it a crack by ourselves."