

We stood about fifty feet apart in a large open area surrounded by rocks and gravel piles. I adopted a low stance that felt completely natural, while Superboy stood like a someone two steps away from going feral, somehow already angry. I glanced to the side, noticing that Black Canary, Martian Manhunter and M'gann were all watching from a safe distance away. Black Canary looked concerned, as did M'gann. I was starting to think that maybe this was a bad idea. Nevertheless I turned back to Superboy.

"First to three knockdowns, or one five second pin, how does that sound?" I asked simply, focusing on my breathing.

"Whatever."

I looked back at Canary and gave her a nod, which she returned and stepped a bit closer. After a moment she shouted.

"Go!"

Superboy shouted at me immediately, jumping into the air, his fist raised. I hesitated for half a second, shocked at his aggressiveness. As he reached the apex of his jump and started falling down towards me I took a half step forward, lined myself up and thrust my hands forward and up. A pillar of solid granite a foot or so wide jutted from the ground, brushing past me and slamming into Superboy's chest. His falling and the upward movement of the rock pillar led to an impact that shattered the pillar and threw me aside. I rolled and came up on one knee, watching the dust and scattering rocks. I noticed a shadow of movement and jumped back just in time for Superboy to lunge out of the dust and pulverize the ground where I had just been. His shirt was torn around his stomach, his skin scuffed and red where the pillar had impacted.

He roared and jumped after me, this time staying low. I landed on my feet, using the impact to push three rocks the size of basketballs from the ground. The first one I kicked at Superboy, forcing him to slow down, while my fingers dug into the other two. I swung one down and back, using it as a counterweight to smash the other one across Superboys chest as hard as I could. He raised his arms to defend himself, the rock breaking against his forearms.

I used the spin of the counter weight stone to pull me away and get me clear of Superboys reach. Or it was supposed to, but he reached out and grabbed my arm, throwing me halfway across the clearing. I tumbled but managed to end up on one knee again, this time standing up immediately.

Superboy lunged at me again with a shout, forcing me to dodge to the right, managing to slam my fist into his side as he flew past me. He stumbled but managed to stay upright... until I broke another pillar of rock across his back. It drove him to the ground, and while he quickly climbed back to his feet it was enough for Black Canary to call out.

"Warren gets the first point!"

I dropped my fighting stance, preparing myself to reset to our original positions when Superboy shouted and charged me, driving a punch across my chin that I barely managed to turn into a glancing blow. Even then it sent me back a dozen feet and rattled my skull enough that I stumbled back onto my ass.

“Point to Superboy!”

“Really? A cheap shot? What happened to a friendly spar?” I asked, slowly getting back up, rubbing my chin. “Alright, if that’s how it’s going to be, try and keep up.”

For a moment Superboy’s eyes widened, either because he hadn’t expected me to stand back up or he hadn’t realized what he did until I pointed it out. Either way he still charged me, recklessly shouting with his arm pulled back. I smirked and stamped my foot, a foot deep hole sinking around his next step. He stumbled, unable to recover and fell forward... right onto a rising pillar of granite. The palm wide rough cylinder of rock caught the falling teen in the jaw and spun him around, his forward momentum sending him sprawling across the ground.

“Point to Warren!”

This time I jumped back a few times, giving me some distance from the increasingly frustrated clone. Internally I debated with myself. Superboy obviously had a chip on his shoulder, not entirely unexpected considering his age and origin. I remembered my angry teen phase. Hell, plenty of people would argue it hasn’t ended yet. If I wanted to be on a team with him I would need to get through to him somehow. It could happen the natural way, with time and patience... or it could happen the dramatic way.

Fuck it, this was some sort of superhero world. Dramatic character development ahoy!

Superboy stood finally, a cut along his jaw that dripped blood slowly. He was clearly pissed, mouth stuck in a soundless growl as he leaped at me, once again completely open. Instead of using that to my advantage and hitting him I simply dodged, combat rolling away. As I stood, I grabbed a small pile of rocks, cocked my arm back and used a combination of earthbending and my enhanced strength to fire the small stone like a bullet, striking my sparring partner in the hip. Again he lunged at me, and again I dodged. I kept this up as he attempted to hit me, throwing wide punches, a few kicks and even one telegraphed headbutt. He came close more than a few times, even managed to land a few hits, but luckily as I focused completely on dodging him I was able to turn and avoid any serious damage. This continued for a full five minutes, the younger teens’ anger rising steadily.

“Grrr Stop dodging and fight me!” He shouted, slamming his fist through a wall of stone I erected, reducing it to rubble. “Or do you already know you can’t beat me?”

I responded by hitting him in the forehead with a rock.

He roared at me, devolving into some sort of wild rage. I half expected him to try and run at me on all fours. He grabbed two chunks of the small rock wall he had just broken and hurled them at me. I spun out of the way from the first one and half caught, half redirected the second one, hurling it back at him at almost twice the speed.. The rock shattered against his chest, making him stumble back and pause, catching his breath.

“Do you want to be angry? Or do you want to win?” I called out while he was standing still, holding his chest.

His anger faltered for a moment, his confusion breaking through.

“Do you want to be angry? Or do you want to win?” I asked again before continuing. “Because I can do this- I can do this for a while.”

“What... what do you mean?” He asked, his anger starting to truly fade.

I dropped my stance and walked to him, pushing over a wall of stone as I did. I stopped a few feet away from him, keeping my face calm.

“You've got a chip on your shoulder.” I said, holding up a hand when he started to get angry. “I'm not saying that that's wrong or anything. You got screwed and I can't blame you for being angry. But you're gonna get your ass kicked a lot if you let your rage dictate your fighting style. I mean I'm not even that good at this yet and while I'm sure you were holding back the fact that I'm standing at the end of this is a bad sign.”

“What the hell do you know about me?”

“Admittedly, not a lot. But that doesn't mean I'm blind either.” I pointed out. “You're shouting and screaming like a mad man, telegraphing your moves like a cartoon character. What would Superman think?”

I could practically feel the click of the land mine I had just stepped on when Superboy's expression dropped. He scowled, turned and started walking away.

“Hey, what about our spar?” I called out as he got farther away.

“I'm done.” He answered gruffly, not even turning around.

“At least think about what I said.” I responded. “And not the Superman part!”

Superboy stopped, still looking forward before eventually nodding and continuing to walk away. He made his way around the bend of the path and disappeared from view.

Black Canary watched him leave as well before giving Martian Manhunter a look. He nodded and walked after Superboy, while Canary turned and made her way to me, having to walk around several holes and crater.

“Are you alright?” She asked, moving her head to look at my chin. “He caught you a couple times.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Bruises will probably be gone by tomorrow anyway.” I assured her. “Why did he react so poorly to me mentioning Superman?”

“Thats... Not something I feel comfortable discussing.”

“Fair enough.” I said with a shrug. “Does he have anyone to talk to? Any way to blow off steam?”

“His teammates, me if he wants to.” She said, though she winced and tapped her ear. “Why?”

It took me a moment to realize what she was implying, and when I did I also winced. Superboy was a clone of Superman, someone who was known for having impressive super hearing. Canary asked why to give me a chance to redeem myself so it didn't look like I was pitying him.

I loved having an enhanced brain.

“He reminds me of myself, before my step-father got through to me.” I explained, adding the extra detail so Superboy would understand if he was listening in. “Before I realized that needing help wasn't a bad thing.”

“You know most adults struggle with that concept.”

“Just because I know it doesn't mean I practice it.” I said with a chuckle.

“Of course.” Black Canary said with a smile. “What about you?”

“What about me?” I asked, not understanding her.

“Do you have anyone to talk to? Any way to blow off steam?”

I was quiet for a while, looking at the mess Superboy and I had made. I walked to the closest crater and focused for a moment, raising it back to level ground with a simple move.

“Anyone I would have talked to is in another universe.” I explained after a short silence. “I’m not ready to replace them quite yet.”

“You wouldn't be.”

"I know. But it would feel like I was." I explained, before changing the subject. "As for blowing off steam, nothing works off frustration quite like shattering boulders with your bare hands. Plus there is a fair bit of kinetic meditation for any bending. Like Tai Chi."

I punctuate my last statement by chopping a pillar in half before thrusting my hand downwards, palm open to return the remaining stone down into the earth.

"I suppose I can't argue with that." Black Canary said. She opened her mouth to continue but was cut off by M'gann flying over to us.

"Are you alright?" She asked, landing next to both of us.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." I responded. "How did your tryouts go?"

"They went fine...Miss Canary says that I need to work on my cardio but..."

The three of us slowly made our way back to the warehouse entrance, making small talk about our tryouts. Canary hung back slightly, probably because she wanted to give us our space. When we got to the warehouse I noted that Superboy was sitting in one of the chairs I had made. I was debating internally about if I should say something when I noticed Martian Manhunter making his way to me.

"Mr. Warren. If you would like, I believe we have time for me to check your mind for outside influences and damage."

"Oh... already?" I asked, fighting my own nervousness. "Could you explain the process?"

"Very well, though Earth languages lack words to describe several aspects of what I will be doing."

"Just the overview then."

"Every mind has a feel to it, an essence that psychically capable individuals can sense. From the outside, it is like a color, or perhaps an aura, though 'seen' through senses humans on average lack." He began to explain, actually using air quotes around "seen". "Internally however, when we enter a mind psychically it encompasses us. From there, detecting outside influence is as easy as exploring, using any suspicions you might have to locate what might have been changed. Outside influence is, unless done by the most expert of practitioners, relatively easy to identify once you are in its presence. Imagine sitting in a warm pool, only for a small current of cold water to run past your leg. You wouldn't confuse it for anything other than different from the rest of the water."

"So what I'm hearing is that you're going to have to go deep, invasive and very much out of my comfort zone?" I asked.

“...Yes, that is accurate.”

I closed my eyes and took in a long breath, holding it for a long moment before releasing it. I needed to do this, to know that I wasn't falling apart at the stitches like an old rag. I took another deep breath and opened my eyes.

“How do we do this?”

Martian Manhunter nodded and turned to the warehouse, gesturing for me to follow. We made our way back inside, stopping off to one side where a padded examination table was set up. At the stern Martian's direction I climbed on, laying back and gripping the sides.

“This could take minutes, or it could take hours.” He explained. “Any suspicions or inklings you may have will make the process easier.”

It took a minute for me to respond.

“I...I think I might be more confident, more sure of my decisions. I wasn't really insecure before but... I mean I'm a teenager.” I admitted. “I'm not sure but...I might be more principled as well. It's hard to describe but some things I used to shrug my shoulders at seem... more wrong than they used to.”

“Alright. Would you prefer to be conscious or unconscious for this?”

“Will I feel it?”

“...Yes.”

“Then for the love of God knock me the fuck out.” I said with a forced smile, and was out before I could continue

----- *Four Hours Later* -----

When I woke up the world spun around me like a top, and I gripped the bed so hard I heard the metal creak. When the world finally started slowing down I sat up on my elbows and looked around. Standing about ten feet away from the examination table was Black Canary, backed by the Martian Manhunter. While the green martian was hard to read, Canary had a solemn face. The kind of face you make when you're about to deliver bad news.

“How bad is it?” I asked, slowly sitting up, swinging my legs over the side. “Am I...”

“Your mind is stable.” Martian Manhunter assured me. “But your suspicions were correct. Your mind is mostly your own, but it has been... added to.”

“How... How much?”

“It is difficult to say one percentage or another. But aspects of you have been modified. It was flawlessly done, with no instabilities or seams, but no attempt was made to hide it. Certain aspects of you are... not entirely you.”

I gave up trying to control myself and the bed frame creaked as I squeezed it. The metal frame buckled slightly, half collapsing.

“So I failed. For weeks I fought it and-”

Black Canary slowly made it to my side, putting her hand on my shoulder. She said nothing as my voice failed me.

“I don’t... I don’t know how to handle this.” I finally admitted. “I don’t... Can you fix it?”

“Not without access to either the mind of Steve Rogers or... your mind before it was affected.” He answered, before continuing. “It is like a lump of clay, you-”

“I don’t fucking care how my mind is like a fucking lump of clay!” I shouted, getting off the table. I stumbled but quickly righted myself, brushing off Black Canary’s hand. “I... I need air.”

I walked past the two adults, stumbling again but making my way to the door. I could feel the fog in my head clearing, the spinning gone now. I stood straight as I left the warehouse. The sun was setting, casting an orange light over the old abandoned quarry. My mind was empty, my brain refusing to work itself around this new knowledge.

I felt normal. The only reason I could tell I was different was because I had memories to compare myself to. I fought the instincts when they weren’t mine, when I could feel them!

How could I fight what was already a part of me?

I found myself where I first used my earthbending, standing in front of the boulder I had shoved into the side of a pile of smaller rocks and then split with a kick. The break was uneven, rough and filled with cracks and protrusions. I focused for a moment, dropping into a low stance, flicking my hands forward and up, shifting my feet around before slamming my hands back down on the surface. The top inch of the new boulder face was pulverized in a small wave extending from both my hands, scattered with an upwards push. The newly exposed surface was flat and level.

Silently I climbed up, sitting back down in the center. I crossed my legs, put my palms on my knees and closed my eyes. Slowly I got my breathing under control, focusing on the feel of the earth around me. When my breathing was slow, steady and under control I opened my eyes.

To find I was not where I had been when I closed them.

I was sitting in the middle of a massive stone pit of some kind, at least a thousand feet wide. The walls were hexagonal rock formations, rising up maybe two hundred feet, though it was hard to judge distance. The floor was a mix of the same stone formations, sand, solid patches of black granite and gravel. Seemingly randomly scattered throughout the massive pit were boulders, rocks and hunks of hexagon basalt chunks.

“Took you long enough.” A voice came from behind me, making me whirl around, standing it of my cross legged position.

“No... There is no fucking way this is real.”

“Of course it's not real!” The woman agreed, a smirk on her face. “But it's a damn good imitation!”

“Then what... what the fuck is going on?” I asked, looking around again.

“It's part of your boon Mopey.” She said, as if it was obvious. “You didn't think an all powerful extra dimensional being would say something like ‘Through training and practice’ and then not provide that training didya?”

“... To be fair they have had more misses than hits with me so far soooo... Yeah?”

“Well guess what Mopey, you were wrong! It's time for Earthbending 101! Class is in session!”

All I could do was stare at the adult form of Toph Beifong and nod.