

My Hero Automata

Novus Peregrine

Obvious Disclaimer: I do not own My Hero Academia or Nier! Both stories would be very different if I did...

Chapter 151: Heavy Metal

Izumi picked up the slightly dented piece of charcoal-colored metal and turned it over in her hands, examining it critically. Someone else might have needed a dozen tools to analyze it properly. For Izumi her onboard sensor suite was able to do the job, noting everything about the result of their test, down to how many atomic bonds had been broken. A number that was shockingly low, considering that they'd fired a mounted *railgun*, along with several potent and exotic emitter quirks, at the thick plate of metal. It *was* damaged, but not to the point of truly losing its integrity. A testament to just how tough it was. Izumi fed the data from her examination to the terminal in the testing room, even as she returned there with the chunk of metal. As she entered, Momo spoke up from examining the readout of the scans.

"Well, I'd say this certainly qualifies as a success. Though we still need to decide what to call it."

That the test was a success was a bit of an understatement, but the other part was also true. The metal was, in fact, a modification of the same metals YoRHa androids were made out of. It was something they'd only been able to make *at all*, and then only in small quantities, once setting up orbital infrastructure. It *required* both a zero-gravity environment and a fairly thorough understanding of Maso/Quirk Energy. YoRHa may have been extreme elite units, but there had never been all that many of them, precisely because it was *hard* to create the materials for their combat frames. Not even Momo could mass produce the stuff, as it required more than just atomic-level precision. It *also* required Maso, which in their case had been concentrated out of the weaker energy that was QE. Momo might have plenty of that, but *no one* had the precision to control their own QE at the level she'd have needed to for making the stuff. Doubly so since she'd have *also* needed to focus on the complex atomic structures that were also required.

Up until now, making frames for the androids they had already 'woken up' had taken up their entire production ability of the hyper-advanced materials required for an android frame. However, this *new* metal was a *modification* of that 'standard' YoRHa material. In almost every way it was inferior. Slightly less tough, with a much worse strength-to-weight ratio, you'd never be able to build an android frame out of it. That said, there was a *major* advantage to go with the downsides. Specifically, that it was *much* easier to mass produce, at least if you had access to Zero-G environments. With the appropriate orbital infrastructure which they now had increasing access to, they could create enough of it, fast enough, to use for both the skeletal structure and armor plate of a new *Mech*. Specifically, a Super Heavy/Assault design they were prototyping called the Behemoth.

“Adamatine? Endo-steel? Beskar? Badassium?”

Izumi and Momo both blinked at the unexpected input from Kyoka. She’s been on hand to attempt using upscaled sonic canons against the metal, as one of several exotic damage types they’d tested it against. Momo looked bemused as she spoke up in response to Kyoka’s suggestions.

“Fictional metals aren’t the worst place we could look for inspiration, I suppose. I admit I’m surprised you were able to come up with them so easily, though...”

Kyoka blushed slightly as Momo trailed off, an obvious question in her voice. Their girlfriend twirled one of her jacks around a finger as she half-defensively explained.

“My dad is kinda a nerd? I’ve seen a bunch of old movies and read a few books and comics he has...you know, when I was younger.”

Momo looked delighted. She was, by *far*, the best read of the three. At least where fiction was concerned. Izumi tended to focus on scientific journals or textbooks. Before Momo could launch into questioning Kyoka’s reading the way she very obviously wanted to, Izumi cleared her throat to bring attention back to the issue at hand.

“Whatever the inspiration, we need to name it. For that matter, we’ve just been using the number chain designator for the metal used in the androids, since YoRHa tended not to actually *name* things properly. Not even *themselves*.”

The other two girls immediately winced at that. It was a bit of a weird sticking point that the androids didn’t see any need to pick *names*, instead just going by their model designations. Izumi personally thought it *might* change, given enough time and exposure to human culture. It might *not*, either, though. 2B had never indicated any desire to change her name...but *her* reasons were more complicated than the other ex-YoRHa androids. After all, 2B had technically been created as **2E**. In her very specific case, adopting the designation **2B** as hers, even once it no longer mattered, actually *was* a choice. She *wanted* to be 2B, not 2E, for important personal reasons.

None of which solved their need to come up with a name for their new metal...

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Aetherite and Black Aetherite. Those had ultimately been the two names they’d settled on for their ‘new’ materials. Aetherite had seemed fitting for the lightweight but incredibly tough metal that YoRHa combat android frames were made of, as the formation process made *heavy* use of Maso. Not QE, mind you, but *Maso*. Which had been part of the problem in making very much of it, as you needed to condense QE by a factor of nearly twenty to end up with proper Maso. Something which, on the planet itself, would have lit any site up to attract every Rift Bubble in Japan.

Part of the difference in making Black Aetherite, which made it more practical to create in significant quantities, was a much lower density required of QE. A skeleton part or slab of armor panel made from Black Aetherite needed less than half the condensed QE that *one tenth* the quantity of proper Aetherite required. Meaning that, for the same QE cost, you could make an equal amount of Black Aetherite for around 5 percent of the QE cost. Considering how much energy was

lost in condensing QE in the first place, and cheaper costs for the *other* materials in Black Aetherite, it was viable to actually make larger amounts of it. Still expensive by almost any measure, but *viable*, at least.

Which was a seriously good thing, considering why they needed it in the first place.

Specifically, they needed it because the Terran Alliance *finally* had significant amounts of information on the Zilts themselves. The ruling species of Ziltmach and the Empire of Kurrick had been *incredibly* illusive until the Terran Alliance started taking Ziltmach cities. Even then, it hadn't been until the *third* city, in which local partisans had managed to disable any teleportation out of the city before the Zilts could flee, that they'd actually managed to *capture* one.

Disturbingly, they were among the most human-looking species in some ways...if only for half of their body.

Zilts turned out to be only half-humanoid in form, averaging about 10 ft (305 cm) in total length, but with a significant chunk of that length being a snake-like lower half making them resemble a Naga or Lamia. Their humanoid upper half had pointed ears and small, vestigial horns. Their hands were somewhat clawed, possessing an extra joint on each finger, but only having three fingers and a thumb on each hand overall. Their faces featured a pair of breathing slits instead of a nose, reptilian eyes that ranged from bright red to yellow in color, and their overall skin tones that ranged in color from pale mauve or lavender to near-black violet. Their lower halves were thickly scaled and serpentine, with powerful muscles that could propel them at startling speeds. Only one, out of a half dozen, had been captured alive...but *had* spilled plenty of information.

More, it had to be said, out of arrogance than fear.

Based on the information they now had, it seemed that the Zilts honestly had a very *small* population. At least, comparative to all of their servant races. Apparently, the Lizardfolk (who they now knew were properly called the Kazem) had evolved *alongside* the Zilts, being fully native to Ziltmach. It was the Zilts, however, that had mastered the power of 'Sorcery' when it appeared in their world. Sorcery, in this case, being what the monster races called Quirk Energy and YoRHa's humanity had called Maso. As near as 2B and Izumi could figure, Ziltmach was dimensionally 'farther away' from the death of the The Giant, which had happened in 2B's original home dimension. An event that caused White Chlorination Syndrome in her home dimension's humanity. Quirked Earth, for lack of something better to call it, had been several dimensions away and less effected than 2B's home dimension. With the dimensional spread of Maso causing Quirks as humans managed to *adapt* instead of having their systems overwhelmed.

Ziltmach was even *farther* away, perhaps near the 'farthest' away in the dimensional sea that would have experienced noticeable effects. Unfortunately, there seemed to be an unpredictable degree of time dilation that they were still unable to make heads or tails of. Quirked Earth had been flooded with Maso particles a comparative decade or two *before* the same point in time that The Giant had died...and Ziltmach had experienced the same wave, albeit weaker, *centuries* earlier. The end result being that, despite having a much weaker exposure, the Zilts had possessed much longer to master manipulating it. Mastery that had led to them taking over the Kazem, who revered them as 'touched by the gods.' Something which had, in turn, let them begin

conquering other worlds, once they stumbled upon how to open tunnels through the Dimensional Sea.

As fascinating at the history was, it unfortunately wasn't the relevant point.

The *relevant* point was that the *vast* majority of the Zilts, whose total population was suspected to be under a million, lived in a massive fortress city called simply the Dark Citadel. Which, yes, looked *just* as much like an Edgelord had built it as you might think from the name. Something that the Terran Alliance knew because the Zilt they'd captured hadn't hesitated to tauntingly point it out to them. A willingness that they'd attributed to arrogance...at first.

At least until they'd tried to attack it.

The Dark Citadel was on the very edge of territory the Alliance now controlled. Unfortunately, when they'd marched on it with a probing attack, they'd quickly learned that it was an *entirely different beast* compared to the cities they'd captured so far. Those, it turned out, hadn't *actually* been that well defended. Yes, they'd had walls, shields, and garrisons. But those defenses had, apparently, been a case of minimalistic rear-line defenses put in by paranoid conquerors of an earlier era and not really kept updated. Human artillery had outranged any weapons mounted on their walls, and the walls had been reinforced with 'enchancements' only to a minimal level.

The Citadel, being the home of the rulers of the Empire, was an *entirely different animal*, and the probing assault force had been *completely wiped out* from far beyond the range of anything they'd seen from the enemy so far. Likewise, attempts to attack it from range had failed utterly. The Citadel's weapons actually *outranged* most field artillery. Even when hundreds of cruise missiles had been painstakingly moved from Earth in pieces and reassembled on Ziltmach...the Citadel's air defense had utterly wiped away the aerial bombardment attempt before it got anywhere *close* to hitting. So far, only lances of Shieldmaiden II – Mod Q's, supported by YoRHa androids, had survived an attempt to get close. Even that group hadn't managed to do any serious *damage* before getting battered badly enough to be forced to retreat.

This was, to put it mildly, a major problem.

Even with significant parts of the Empire now in open revolt, the simple truth of the matter was that the Terran Alliance and humanity as a whole just flat-out *didn't have the numbers* to win a long-term war. Post Quirk-Wars and Era of Chaos, humanity barely had a population in excess of three and a half billion, with those numbers dropping even farther during the early Invasion which had killed tens of millions. The Empire of Kurrick, on the other hand, was estimated to have a population in excess of *75 billion*, spread over something like fourteen worlds. So far, the only two reasons the weight of numbers hadn't *drowned* Earth, were that the Empire couldn't bring all of those numbers to bare at once...and so far humanity had achieved a *high* kills to deaths ratio. Even accounting for all the civilians killed, the estimated ratio was five to one in humanity's favor.

That couldn't hold up forever. Eventually, sheer weight of numbers and the inability to *make enough bullets*, would turn the tide against humanity. The only two *real* chances of managing a *win* were to either get a large enough percentage of the Empire to *rebel*...or to decapitate the Empire by wiping out the Zilts. The latter options was, frankly, the better. After all, even if it *failed* to achieve an

immediate victory, it would *at minimum* drastically increase the number of those revolting across various worlds. Which would, in turn, solve the numbers issue in a different way.

Which, of course, is why the High Command of the Terran Alliance had once again turned to Aegis Inc for a solution. They'd asked for 'one more miracle,' and the whole of Aegis that could be spared was shifted to trying to generate just that. All other work had been handed off to secondary teams as Izumi, Momo, and Melissa all focused on creating something that could survive laying siege to the Dark Citadel.

After three months, they were all now watching as the first pieces of their answer to that question was put into place, the very first Behemoth Assault Mech slowly coming together...

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Even as the first Behemoth mech started assembly, a new hire of Aegis Inc cackled over her own work.

"YEESSSSS, MY BABY LIVES! YOU SHALL BRING RUIN ON THE ENEMIES OF HUMANITY, YOU GLORIOUS, SEXY BEAST!"

Nikolai Bunin and Elizabeth Hardy both sighed in exhausted exasperation. When Mei Hatsume had been hired away from her work at UA, to take on the Power Armor projects of Aegis Inc, the pair of them had been assigned to ride herd on her. Mostly Nikolai, it had to be said. With Elizabeth, who was an extremely shy introvert, it had been more a task in *surviving* while working with the excitable pinkette. Doubly so once Mei had discovered that Elizabeth specialized in weapons systems of all types and stripes.

At least Hera and Hana had both been assigned elsewhere. Putting the twins anywhere *near* Mei would have been an entire series of Epic War Crimes waiting to happen. As it was, both of them were *extremely* grateful that 21O was splitting her time between the two projects, and was *somewhat* able to reign Mei in. Nikolai had enough of a wrestling match just getting the manic inventor to properly *standardize* things, so that they could mass produce the new power armor that Mei had been working on.

For all their pain and suffering though, they had to admit that getting Hatsume involved with making Power Armor more widely available had been the correct call. Not only had she been behind the PA that the UA Guild was using, but she was an absolute *wizard* at working with non-electric systems. Her steampunk-come-post-apocalypse design philosophy had meant a greater focus on mechanical systems from the start, and Mei had adapted to QE as a power source far more quickly and completely than others. The original result had been the Mod Q Power Armor that was designed for use in the Rift Bubbles. Those, however, suffered a restriction of not being able to use *any* electronic parts, and having some hard limits on size to get into the Bubbles before they broke into realspace in the first place.

The *current* result which she was cackling over were an entirely different beast. Half again the size of the PA-Mod Q, and making use of the modular chips and basic electronics that could be manufactured on Ziltmach now, Mei had created something of a monster. Using QE for power still, but with much more processing power, it was capable of generating an actual *energy shield*, and

had at least a thin layer of the Black Aetherite developed by the Behemoth team as external armor. Combined with a heavy *gatling laser* that could *overcharge* to produce a *beam weapon*, the ‘Doomtreader’ armor had a *very serious* chance of allowing infantry to get in close to the Dark Citadel. Doubly so as it would be going in *behind* the Behemoths, using them as cover.

Better yet, with Nikolai riding herd on her to make sure parts were standardized? They could make *thousands* of these suits in the time it would take to make the two dozen Behemoths that High Command wanted for the assault. All they needed to do now was buckle down and get to work...

Chapter 152: Contraction

“Move, move, move!”

Kendo Itsuka grimaced, maxing out the size of her hands and clapping them together over an Ogre, even as she shouted for people to *move*. She wasn’t high enough up *any* chain of command to know what was going on, but the last week had been *hell* as the Terran Alliance seemed to reach down into every division of every department to strip out manpower. The most powerful of the remaining Heroes had been practically drafted, military units had been reduced by as much as *half* around some cities, and even the Militias had been raided to pick out some of their most powerful. Virtually the only groups untouched were the Guild teams, and even *they* were pulling double duty, not just working Rift Bubbles but helping police all other monster incursions as well. Incursions that had *picked up pace* just when so many people had been pulled away.

For the first time in six months, it felt like they were *losing* ground. Hell, she was evacuating people away from *an industrial complex* that they just flat out couldn’t hold any longer, despite how important it had been to making new militia hardware. She had no idea what the fuck was going on, but the Higher Command of the Terran Alliance had better announce *something* soon, or there was going to be a new level of panic from the civilians.

Hell, for that matter, there was going to be a new level of panic from the remaining troops and Heroes if they didn’t get an explanation soon! The only reason that panic hadn’t set in yet, was that the cities were still being covered against any serious assault. As they failed to fully cull roving monster teams, and outright lost some important spaces they’d spent a lot of blood to regain in the first place, that was going to change quick.

She just hoped they powers that be knew what the fuck they were doing...

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Intelli growled in frustration as she attempted to juggle the various projects that High-Com *insisted* needed done by brutal deadlines. She’d reached the point where their demands were *impossible* while still expanding their orbital works, and when she’d flat out told them as much...they’d told her to *stop expanding the orbital works*. Now, she was robbing Peter to pay Paul as it were, stealing resources that were meant to go towards those expansion projects, just to hit the production demands for military hardware that were being foisted on her.

At least her position was considered critical enough that she'd been told *why* she'd been given such impossible orders.

She pitied the lower rung of military and Heroes alike, who had no idea that their assets were being raided to produce a massive assault force, intended to capture the Dark Citadel. Unlike the probing attacks that had occurred until now, this new assault was the real deal. A *major* commitment of force that was crippling virtually every other area in order to support it. For the first time in months, despite the ever-increasing size of various resistance movements helping them, the Alliance was *losing* ground on Ziltmach. It wasn't anything critical yet, none of the captured cities were under threat or siege. But territory *was* being lost, which was undermining morale for both the Alliance and their Resistance allies.

She damn well hoped high command knew what they were doing. If the assault failed and they lost even half of the assault force, they likely wouldn't be able to try again for *years*. If, that was, they could ever even try again *at all*. Only the fact that they'd gotten a bunch of mining and space-based industry working was keeping them solvent in materials as they lost territory on *Earth* as well, and if the assault failed they might get overwhelmed by numbers and pushed off their own planet entirely. At this point that *technically* wouldn't be the death knell of humanity...but *at best* they might get a few million people off the planet.

As she shifted assets *again*, actually ordering some of the Drone Construction Fleet stripped for resources, she repeated her desperate hope that the powers that be were taking the right gamble here...

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Akira wasn't normally one to *exert* herself overly on other people's behalf. That was, it had to be said, more her girlfriend Kiki's jam. It was *Kiki* who, despite being Quirkless, was the unending bundle of good cheer that did her best to make everyone around her happier. Akira was more...guarded and cynical than that. Heck, part of why she was practically addicted to Kiki was that her girlfriend was one of the rare rays of adorable sunshine that pushed back that tendency toward cynicism. Even those with very little faith in humanity, when exposed to even a fraction of Kiki's cheeriness, couldn't help but smile at least a little.

The only exceptions were all puppy-kickers. Akira was sure of it.

Her usual tendency to stay out of other people's business meant that Akira was a little weirded out *by her own behavior* as she made the rounds of the Neo Ge Market. The *advantage* of being a cynic was that you tended to see the problems coming early. Usually, that just meant extra time to *duck*, which she was both grateful for and used to protect Kiki. *This time*, though, she'd found her feet moving and her mouth uttering the same sort of suggestions and redirections that she'd seen the manipulators of the world use to steer thought. It had been an awkward fit, at first, but she'd ultimately been nearly creeped out at how quickly she'd found herself getting good at it.

Apparently, *understanding* how the masses worked and how they reacted to certain psychological buttons, made you really good at pressing them when you were motivated to do so. Who knew?

As for *why* she was motivated to press those buttons, it was because *paying attention* had let her see the contraction coming. She'd noticed the downsizing of militia patrols, the Heroes that weren't being seen, and the suspicious *lack* of reporting about losses that could justify that needed that she *wasn't* hearing about from the grapevine. At the same time, she'd been keeping a close eye on Aegis Inc since she'd met its owners and was aware that they were gearing up for something *big*. What, exactly, she didn't know...but whatever it was, it was important enough for the Terran Alliance to be stripping every asset they could to throw into the fire.

Just this once, Akira would hope that the people up top knew what they were doing, and that whatever they were building up for would be a *good thing*. In the meantime, she'd do her part by dropping the right words, in the right ears, to keep people calm for as long as possible. At least in this little corner of Tokyo. It might not be much, but it was what she could do, and somehow she found herself doing it willingly, despite how little she normally believed in the system.

Despite being a cynic to the core, she didn't think those girls she'd met would let them down. Not if they could help it, and she had a hard time imagining that they couldn't, given what they'd already accomplished. Was she becoming, horror of horrors, a fangirl? Well, at least that would be better than becoming a *politician*. She carefully avoided thinking about the little details. Like the fact that her methods of manipulation were disturbingly close to those used by people in that most heinous of professions...

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Himiko flopped dramatically on one bed of the hotel room she was sharing with Kiana. Her adoptive mother-figure's lips twitched at the action, still amused by how *extra* Himiko tended to be when she wasn't playing a part. She'd long gotten used to it, of course, but it was something that she honestly hoped never stopped causing her to smile. Even if she often hid those smiles from Himiko just to keep her pseudo-daughter from being *even more extra* to get a reaction.

"I take it, since you're flopping in fake exhaustion instead of grumbling and playing with knives, that the meeting went well?"

Himiko had covered her eyes with one arm, but let it fall now, moving *just* enough for her gaze to meet Kiana's. Her expression was *annoyed*, but not worried or angry, which was a good sign. With the JSDF having taken over a lot of the external security for Aegis, the pair of them had opted to hand off most internal-security work to others and focus instead on the intelligence networks they'd built.

Originally purely an extension of the need to protect the HSN systems from people trying to disrupt or hack into them, those networks had been expanded when the League of Villains had been active. Now, they'd turned the same networks to *another* purpose yet. Specifically, keeping an ear to the ground about trouble within the civilian populations, and attempting a limited level of information control. Just because there was an Alien Invasion on didn't mean there weren't still criminals doing *all the crimes*, and with everyone packed so tightly into cities it could be a complete disaster if that crime got out of control.

Thankfully, Japanese criminals were *mostly* saner than...some others. Probably. As evidenced by Himiko speaking up, after letting her head fall back on the bed again.

“The Yakuza remnants, the Black Dogs, and the Eighty-Eight, have all agreed to sit on their people for the duration. Once they were given hints about *why* so many heroes and militia were being pulled out, they weren’t big enough dummies to cause trouble. They might be assholes, but they’re assholes that know they have to live on the planet too. I doubt the agreement will hold past the Citadel falling, though.”

Kiana nodded. It had been the *expected* and *hoped for* result of the meeting. Humans could get very, very stupid at the oddest times, though. Like the MLA had when the Invasion first kicked off. Thankfully, the three groups Himiko had rattled off were the largest ‘organized crime’ factions in Japan, and Himiko posing as an information broker had allowed them to pull all three into a neutral-ground meeting. In truth, it wasn’t really even ‘posing,’ at this point. Setting themselves up as information brokers had been their key into the underworld. That they were one of the only brokers with reliable information on the war made them valuable, and had let them believably pass on the ‘secret’ of why so many troops were being shuffled.

Some civic disruption was inevitable. Just as some lost ground to the Empire was going to happen. But by getting the organized crime factions in on things, it would be mitigated somewhat. As Himiko said, it likely wouldn’t hold for *long*, but so long as it held *long enough*, that was fine. Assuming they won at all, the Terran Alliance could release some assets back to various militaries and Hero agencies to make up any lost ground. Hopefully, at least. There was, of course, always the chance that they won *but* took too many losses to reestablish proper security. It was a risk, but a needed one. After all, even if they lost some control to criminal elements, *ending* the war would *eventually* let them deal with that. Even if they couldn’t do so immediately...

“Good job, little vampire. Take a nap. I’ll keep an eye on our data taps to make sure they actually send out the orders they agreed to.”

Himiko gave her a thumbs up, then promptly stretched like a cat, rolled over, and ‘engaged napping mode.’ Chuckling, Kiana went to work doing her part. Himiko was the ‘face’ of their operation, being able to pretend to be a dozen different people with her Quirk. Kiana was the brains, though, and she still had work to do. She never thought she’d been using the ill-gotten skills drilled into her by the HPSC this way, but it was certainly better than the way *the commission* had put them to use...

Chapter 153: Preparing the Stage

“Good! Good, keep the flow rate even! Slow is steady and steady is fast. Keep an eye on the pressure as it floods each new subsystem!”

Satisfied that the tech was doing his job right, Izumi stepped back to observe the individual components of the Behemoth she was overseeing slowly activate. Not perfectly, there were some power flickers here and there indicating systems that might need a quick once over, but that was well within expectations. The new mech class, coming in just *barely* shy of 185 tons, was *too big* to bring through even a Greater Gate in one piece. As such, it had been built with modular field assembly in mind, disassembled and brought through in pieces, only to be reconstructed on Ziltmach. Unlike the Shieldmaiden and Operator mechs, it was also four-legged design, not two. It

was too heavy to make hover, which is why it was a mech still, and a huge amount of its weight was in from its Black Aetherite skeleton and armor.

Add in a shield generator as potent as they could make it, and the Behemoth was built to soak damage like British man was made for being stoic about a light drizzle. The *two dozen* of them that were being assembled on the fields between Alpha Base and the city of Iztiliana represented *tens of billions of yen* worth of material, and *months* of max capacity usage of *Forge 2* to make the Black Aetherite needed. Numerous other projects had been stalled or even outright cancelled just to build two dozen of them...but there was a good reason for that.

After all, it was the Behemoths that were intended to *break* the Dark Citadel.

Aside from them, the fields both here and around other Ziltmach cities were filled to overflowing with additional hardware. Over 3,500 infantry frantically training with Mei's new Doomreader Power Armor. Hundreds of American-built Saber series Hover Tanks. Thousands of towed artillery pieces from a dozen different sources. Over 7,000 'Heroes,' including some who might well more easily be consider villains, pulled from various fronts across the entire world. Not to mention over 235,000 regular troops, and 165,000 Ziltmach rebels, all of whom would soon be maneuvering to surround the Dark Citadel, waiting for the heavy units to break the Citadel's defenses before they flooded in.

By all accounts, there were at *least* three quarters of a million Zilts withing the Dark Citadel. Plus supporting troops.

The leaders and generals of the Terran Alliance were expecting the fighting to be bloody, even once they breached the defenses of the fortress. They could only *hope* both that the Behemoths could do the job of cracking it open...and that they'd brought enough people and bullets to put an end to the Zilts once they got inside. She, Momo, All Might, and even Stars and Stripes would all be leading breaching teams from the Behemoths themselves. *These* mechs could carry a small complement of troops, only a dozen or so for each Behemoth despite their size, but the teams breaching from them would be made up of some of the more powerful Heroes in the world...assisted by YoRHa combat androids. A2, in particular, had made such a name for herself that she would be leading one of the Breaching Teams just like Izumi and Momo.

The task at hand was both staggering and solemn, given the likely death toll for both sides even if everything worked out perfectly. On the other hand? Well, they stood a reasonable chance of this being the *final battle*, at least the final battle that *mattered* and tipped the scale permanently towards the 'good guys.' Everyone, from the leaders of the Alliance down to the grunts, had decided it was worth the gamble. All that was left to do now was the stack the deck as much as possible, then roll the dice...

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Lieutenant Kwalski was in both in awe of and terrified by the power of his new armor. As someone born with a Quirk that only allowed him to change the shape of his genitals, he'd never exactly expected to be a hero anywhere but between the sheets. He was, in fact, *quite* popular in that regard, so he'd never exactly *disliked* his Quirk. Yet, he'd never expected to feel the heady sense of power that those born with high-quality combat quirks must feel.

The Doomtreader Power Armor was proving he'd been wrong about that.

While the PA he was currently running through an obstacle course with (complete with holographic targets!) wasn't the sort of thing that could punch out All Might, Kwalski would give it fair odds of doing so for the average Hero. Honestly, probably even quite a lot of the *above* average Heroes, given that it wasn't stuck in any one niche. Durable enough to take a serious hit even from Power Type Heroes, fast enough to outrun most non-mobility focused Heroes, and with fire power that honestly outstripped what anything but the highest tier of combat quirks could deliver. All complete with a sensor suite, comms, and intuitive heads-up-display that fed him all the information he needed. Not just about his own suit, either, but about the status of his squad. It was a quantum leap forward for infantry. If you could even still call them infantry at this point.

Of course, giddy as he was, and worried as he might be about what this development might mean for the future...what he had to hope at the moment was that it would be *enough*. He'd seen the results of the probing efforts against the 'Dark Citadel,' and even Shieldmaidens had been torn up by sustained fire from the fortress. He *really* hoped those new Behemoths lived up to their name and purpose. Though, given who had made them, he supposed he could invest a little faith in the idea.

For now, he should probably just focus on getting through this obstacle course without tripping and ending up face first in the ground again like an idiot...

... ..

Captain Jones of the 761st Tank Battalion was extremely satisfied with her new Saber II – Mod Q. Sure, it was a *fair bit* more primitive than the original Saber she'd commanded in the African Campaign, having very limited computer support just for starters. Yet, there were more upsides than down. The most important, of course, was why it was called a Mod Q. The term had been coined by that Japanese defense firm, Aegis Inc. But, given that their pet super genius had been the one to figure out how to use Quirk Energy to run something like a Saber, she figured that was fair enough.

More importantly, being a Mod Q meant that it was suitable for use on Ziltmach.

That wasn't the *only* advantage, of course. A number of improvements had been made from the original Saber to the Saber II, including something the Japs *hadn't* figured out yet, so far as she knew. That being how to process certain common monster materials into a new armor that was tougher than the original Saber, while being a little bit lighter. It wasn't as brutally tough as the Black Aetherite those new Behemoths of theirs used, but it was a heck of a lot lighter. Light enough to keep the Saber II – Mod Q as a hover tank, despite the QE engine being slightly weaker than the old powerplant. Of course, Aetherite of the non-black variety, the stuff they used for the combat android frames, would be even better...but apparently that stuff was *hellishly* hard to make. To the point that even Aegis only had enough of it to make a few android bodies a week. Given just how *insane* of a force multiplier those androids could be, making more frames for them was the objectively better use for the stuff.

Besides, it was *great* for troop morale to have hot android girls that *really* liked humans running around in skintight bodysuits. She hadn't even realized she was bi until she'd interacted with a few of those girls! Hmmm, maybe it was less 'bi' and more 'badass robogirl sexual?'

Shaking that thought off with a grin, Jones went back to reading the reports for her section's Sabers. The fact that the paperwork was *remarkably* thin, compared to what she'd had with *just a single tank* back in Africa was another nice thing about the Mod Q specifically. Between a power plant that didn't use traditional fuel, just plug-and-play QE batteries filled back on Earth, and the simplified electronics? There was a *lot* less maintenance required on the Mod Qs, and far fewer problems reported. Not bad at all for a design that had been rushed into production with the bare minimum of quality testing!

She just hoped the new shield systems, combined with the new armor, would let the tanks hold up to some fire from the Dark Citadel. Even if the Behemoths would hopefully be taking most of the focus fired, there was almost certain to be *some* aimed at the rest of the armor. Doubly so if the fire ended up not working to hurt the Behemoths much.

Well, what would be, would be. Captain Jonna Jones would be in the thick of the fire, just as she always was! They hadn't nicknamed her the 'The Salamander' for no reason! She had a nice talent for being where the fire was hottest and coming out mostly intact...

... ..

General Beaumont watched on as the massive convoy began to move. Hers was only one of five such convoys that were rolling out from various captured cities. It was the largest, though, and the only one headed by the new Behemoth mechs. She honestly wasn't sure the intimidating monstrosities should be *called* mechs, but admittedly wasn't sure what *else* you'd called them. Currently classed as 'Superheavy Assault Mechs,' each Behemoth was a solid 10.3 *meters* long, and 3.95 meters wide. They were blunt-nosed, nearly obsidian-black due to that new type of armor, and mounted with two heavy railguns and an even heavier plasma weapon that she barely understood. No pre-invasion power plant could have made the things run, and apparently Aegis Inc had needed to develop a whole new generation of QE battery to make them practical. You could apparently power a Rift to open with the energy it took to move those monsters for even twenty minutes. Less, if it's shield was on.

Frankly, it would have been better to assemble them closer to the Dark Citadel. But doing that might have given something away, and they weren't exactly hurting for stockpiles of QE. Given how much of it they captured just to shut down Rifts, let alone Rift Bubbles...well, seeing the Behemoths in action she was beginning to understand just *why* Ziltmach would invade to get at an energy source like that. Apparently, despite how much of it both they and the Empire had siphoned off Earth...the Earth's QE field had actually gotten a tiny bit *stronger* over the course of the Invasion. The result, according to what few experts existed, of how much heavier usage humans were putting their Quirks to for both the fighting and logistics.

Given that Ziltmach was constantly, if slowly, *losing* its own ambient QE under the effects of the usage the Empire put it to, it was understandable why they coveted Earth. That said, their methods were genuinely the sort of idiocy that only those who knew nothing but the path of a

conqueror would embrace. If the stone-headed fools had just set up siphons in remote locations on Earth, it likely would have taken *decades* for anyone to notice...if they even noticed at all. Instead, by reacting with the only tool they knew how to use, they'd brought their own doom upon themselves.

Probably.

Hopefully.

She supposed they would see if that was true or not in a few days, when the assault on the Dark Citadel began. She had a lot of faith in those two girls that seemed to be the center of all the important projects, but not even the best could win *every* time. She just hoped this wasn't the time they finally came up short...

Chapter 154: Battle of the Citadel

Izumi tried not to hold her breath as she used a distant Pod to watch her Behemoth advance. *All* of the Behemoths were advancing, ponderously marching into the no man's land around the Dark Citadel, but Izumi had insisted on putting herself in one the lead Behemoths. Less out of courage and more out of the fact she stood a far better chance than most of surviving if her Behemoth went down to defensive fire. High-Com hadn't liked the idea much, or even the idea of her participating at all given her value to the Terran Alliance as a whole. But they hadn't been able to argue her out of it, given how much they were throwing at this venture and how powerful she was on a personal level.

Just how much they were committing was something she could see from her overhead view.

Their armor battalions alone were enough to clog the approaches to the Citadel. The Zilts hadn't been stupid when they'd built their fortress. They'd reshaped a large plateau that had only three approaches, planted their city-fortress in a center, and cleared a kill zone all around it. All three of those approaches had *roads*, thick ones, which served the Fortress. Yet even so, every approach was practically wall-to-wall heavy metal. Eight Behemoths each, followed by 48 Shieldmaiden IIs, twice that number in Operator series mechs, and an entire Armored Battalion *each* based around the Saber II – Mod Qs to follow up the Shieldmaidens and Operators. All with Doomreader Power Armor mixed in as support. Which wasn't even counting the...

THUMP *THUMP* *THUMP* *THUMP* *THUMP* *THUMP*

That. The massed artillery pieces that had just opened fire. Given the plateau working against them, most of it was made out of MRLS (Multiple Rocket Launch Systems) that had been provided with staggering amounts of modified ammo for this job. Now, the fire from those rockets began to rain over the Dark Citadel, attempting to batter down its shield. Not that it seemed to be working, something like eighty percent of the rockets were being *shot down* by was looked like a laser point defense grid. It wasn't, of course, those 'lasers' actually being bolts of the 'magic' that the locals used. It was still *damn* impressive, and showed a far greater level of automation and technical expertise than they'd seen *anywhere* else so far.

Sadly, even the twenty percent of the fire getting through the defenses wasn't making an apparent impact. The rockets impacted on a shield far more potent than even those on the Greater Gates. In truth, previous efforts had shown they weren't likely to be able to batter down that shield. Possibly not even if they'd been willing to bring in nukes.

Which didn't make the assault pointless.

In addition to making it essentially impossible to deploy air assets to attack the rear elements of the army without them being *instantly* fragged by the competing fire, every defensive bolt and hit to the shield cost *energy*. The Zilts obviously had healthy reserves, but they wouldn't have needed to invade Earth at all if they had *limitless* amounts of QE to work with. There *had* to be a limit on just how much energy they could put into their defenses, and forcing them to expend it against the bombardment meant less of it to use in the ground fighting.

Of course, the more important limitation of that shield was the very reason they were marching into that no-man's land. Just like the shields on the Greater Gates, the Zilts couldn't seem to deploy a full shield that went down to ground level. Admittedly, Izumi was one of the few that understood the *why* of that, with some of the metaphysics involved being a stone-cold *bitch* if you didn't have access to heavy duty amounts of processing power. Something the Empire's tech base didn't provide.

Heck, even with the Operator androids and some YoRHa computer systems back on Earth, they'd only *mostly* cracked the issue, allowing the Behemoths and other armor to have decent shields despite being near-ground level. Even then, the shields were incomplete, being forward, top, and side arc facing with open rear aspects. Not that it should matter much when they were being forced into a frontal assault like this anyway.

Just as that thought finished running through Izumi's mind for the hundredth time, the six lead Behemoths, marching 2-by-2, crossed some invisible line in the sand. A dozen *far* thicker beams of power that the anti-air systems lanced out from the Black Fortress, impacting the Behemoths with enough raw force to make their steps stutter. Yet, to the audible relief of everyone in the compartment with her, the shields barely flickered. Of course, Izumi knew more than they did, having a direct feed to the power systems, and *she* internally winced as those opening shots drained around 13% of the shield capacity from their ride. Still, the pilots didn't hesitate, actually pushing their pace *harder* now that they'd been fired upon.

They also began firing *back*, targeting where the onboard systems said the defenses had fire from. Their Behemoth shuddered again, this time from the blowback of the twin railguns firing, trying to knock out the defense installations...only to hit more shields. Smaller and tighter than the massive one over the Citadel as a whole, they did their job of deflecting the railgun rounds...though Izumi hissed a 'yes!' of success as the follow up plasma shots from the *true* main gun of the Behemoths fired. Only *one* of the twelve defensive guns went down, four Behemoths having all had an angle on it and concentrated their fire. Still, when only *eleven* beams shot out as the defensive arrays cycled, Izumi called it a win!

It meant that it *wasn't* pointless to trade shots with the Fortress, and she could practically feel it as the pilots of the mechs began to coordinate, doing their best to make multiple Behemoths

hit each installation, as close to simultaneously as possible. Two more defensive guns died...before the assault force seemed to cross another zone and *different* guns opened up on them. Izumi's hiss *this* time was less happy, as she saw the shields beginning to rapidly die under the shorter-ranged but more numerous weapons.

"Buckle up and hold onto your panties everyone, our shields won't last much longer and we're only a quarter of the distance to the Citadel."

Of course, the lead Behemoths also weren't alone, and those behind them began to fan out a bit. Once their shields went down, the first group would fall back behind the second, letting fresh shields take the hits. Meanwhile, some of the Shieldmaiden-Mod Qs following behind them began to hit their own max ranges for their secondary weapons, launching short-ranged missile systems at targets being painted by the Behemoths.

This proved ineffective at first, the larger defensive emplacements apparently having their own anti-missile systems. Yet, when the Shieldmaidens switched targets to the smaller guns, they started having *some* effect, silencing a number of the lesser emplacements with their rocket fire. A moment after that, however, the first of the Behemoths had a shield failure. It wasn't *her* ride, which still had about 14 percent shield left, but she quickly tapped into the Behemoth with the failure, to see the effects of the next shots as they hit the Black Aetherite armor. Some of her tension bled as she got the results, noting that while the armor had been mildly damaged, it would take *repeated* hits to punch through it. Repeated hits that the enemy wasn't going to get just yet as that particular Behemoth dropped back and another surged forward to take its place.

Izumi's brain was buzzing, hypercognition partially in effect as she tried to work the math. The numbers were *complicated* by the sheer number of things going on, so even her best estimates were only estimates. Still...she was *fairly sure* they were going to make it. The Behemoths, sadly, couldn't recharge shields. Not on Ziltmach at least. The area around the Citadel, even more than *most* of Ziltmach, was barren of naturally occurring QE, all of it likely sucked up long ago by the Citadel itself. That meant the energy-intensive Behemoths were limited to just what they'd been loaded with, and there was only so much room for the new man-sized and hyper-dense QE batteries. Batteries that had to power the mech itself, the shields, and the plasma main gun. Once the shields were gone, they were *gone*, until the battle was over. Likewise, once the 32 shots from the main plasma caster were fired, about a third already gone at this point, it would run dry as well.

Still...calculating for the number of emplacements they'd taken down, and the fact some of the smaller guns were focusing on the Shieldmaiden IIs now? Izumi was *fairly* certain they would make the distance to the walls before being battered apart. Which only left actually getting *through* those walls as a challenge. For that, though, each assault team had their own breaching-focused Quirk. Izumi's team, for example, had Thirteen. Normally against violence, Thirteen *wouldn't* be taking part in the actual assault once breach was achieved, but there was *very little* in the universe that could hold up to the power of a black hole. She would breach the wall for them, just a Honenuk Jozu, borrowed from the Guild for this assault, would do the same for Momo's group. Similar stories, with Quirks uniquely suited for making *walls* into *doors*, were the case with every Behemoth team.

Their own Behemoth lost its shields less than two minutes later, falling back...but as it did Izumi pulled the trigger on one of their extra tricks. From all two dozen Behemoths, *suicide drones* coated in a crude shield and a thin Black Aetherite armor coating flooded out of apertures in their sides. She, 2B, and a half dozen other androids took control of them and guided them *through* the patterns of anti-air fire they'd now had enough time to analyze. With their guidance, over sixty percent of the drones managed to cross the distance, zeroing in on carefully chosen defensive installations. They didn't even *try* to get all of them, instead focusing down hard on four of the largest guns and a dozen smaller ones. Another twenty percent of the drones were knocked off course in the last few seconds...but then the exotic QE bombs they carried, each intended to make a small unstable Rift that would rip through almost anything, hit the installations.

A bare heartbeat later, there were abruptly less guns firing.

More tellingly, for the first time, there was sight of the enemy as *someone* inside the Citadel abruptly realized they might legitimately be in trouble. The gates that opened seemed small, but *only* in comparison to the sheer size of the Citadel, which was a good four hundred meters height of sheer black stone at the outer wall. What came *out* of those gates wasn't small at all, entire squads of something that looked like Ogres...only *significantly* larger. As in, nearly the size of an Operator mech, if not quite up to the size and bulk of a Shieldmaiden.

The enemy charged...but it was here that the Empire proved, despite fighting on Earth, they *really* didn't have a good grasp of proper tactics against modern weapons. They kept tight, holding up shields and charging in old-school ancient cavalry-like formations. Which was *fucking stupid* as the Behemoths were *fully capable* of traversing their railguns and plasma canons down to fire into their massed formations. Those formations turned into bloody chunks, breaking up, with Shieldmaidens that hadn't yet used all their rockets opening up on those that survived.

Not a single enemy got even halfway to them.

Tellingly, the gates closed tight again, even as the Behemoths neared the halfway point.

Izumi scowled a moment later as the enemy proved not to be out of tricks yet. Hundreds of additional openings in the Citadel exterior opened and a *lot* of fire from smaller platforms and individual monsters started pouring out at them. At the same time, higher up the walls, enemy fliers poured out in the thousands, below the shield. That much had been accounted for, with anti-air weapons from both the Behemoths and the Shieldmaidens immediately pouring fire into the fliers, with hundreds of additional anti-air missiles rising from handheld box launchers carried by the Doomtreaders that were advancing behind them. The fliers died by the hundreds, only a tiny fraction of them getting through, and those that did were soon dying to supporting fire from the Saber IIs that were mixed in with the Doomtreaders.

Yet...the increased fire from the walls took its toll, a second set of Behemoths losing shields and falling back behind the third set. That left only one remaining set of replacements, though they were now passed the halfway point to the walls. Better yet, the weapons of the Doomtreaders were now finding the range and *had targets*. Nowhere near powerful enough to damage the defensive guns, they *did* have potent enough guns to start taking a toll on the individual monsters that were exposing themselves to fire. Izumi didn't think they were actually *killing* all that many of the enemy,

but they were doing a good job of *suppressing* the increase in fire they'd offered. The smaller point sources of enemy fire were cut in half as many of those monsters were forced to *duck or die*.

There were no more tricks now, though.

No, now it was time to grit their teeth and push through.

Another minute passed, two, three. The Behemoths weren't *slow* by any means, but the Zilts had made sure there was a *multiple kilometer* killing field around their fortress. The last exchange of fresh shields happened when they were three quarters of the way to the Fortress walls, the Behemoths all out of plasma rounds by now, but having put paid to something like sixty five percent of the larger guns. Guns that were even now still dying as the more numerous guns of the Shieldmaidens and Saber tanks following the Behemoths got clearer and clearer angles. Of course, the enemy was now focusing some fire *on those mechs and tanks*, causing painful losses among their numbers.

Yet it was now clear that the Citadel couldn't stop them.

Ninety percent of the way across the field, the last shields on the Behemoths fell to increasingly frantic fire from the citadel...and Izumi grit her teeth as the Behemoths took the chance to fan out, multiplying the targets as they closed the last of the remaining gap. Armor was taking hits now, and two Behemoths suffered 'Golden BB' type shots, one losing a leg joint that slowed it to a crawl, the other suffering a lucky penetrating shot that must have hit a still-full QE battery, as the Behemoth *exploded*.

Izumi clenched her teeth at seeing that, checking who it had been, and was *relieved* to find it had been one of the Behemoths mostly crewed by YoRHa androids. *They* had backups that they'd been actively streaming their data to, insuring continuity of consciousness. Things got *fuzzy* when you were considering the mortality of an AI mind, particularly given that they were certain from 2B's experience in the Void that androids had *something* like a soul. Still, 2B had 'died' and restored from backups numerous times in the past. So, presumably, continuity of consciousness was all that was required. It was, at least, something more certain than whatever fate awaited the humans and monsters that were dying in this conflict.

Knowing *souls existed* was something that still fucked with Izumi's mind, and she genuinely wasn't sure *what* she believed. Thoughts that she shunted aside again, along with thoughts of her own mortality, as she faced down fire from enemy guns. Maybe, if she lived through this, she should take the time to find religion? Somehow, she thought she was far from the first soldier to consider that in a moment under fire on a battlefield. 'No such thing as an atheist in a foxhole.' That was the saying, wasn't it? Such half-morbid thoughts carried Izumi through the last stretch, hypercognition now a subtle form of torture as she wondered if each shot that tore into their armor would end them.

Then they were there.

The Behemoths barely even slowed as they impacted the walls, having been *explicitly design* for this maneuver. For all their immense toughness and obscene cost, *none* of the Behemoths had been intended to survive this engagement. The overlapping panels that made up

their blunted front opened partially at the last second, specifically engineered crumple zones coming into effect to absorb the impact. Those panels crunched in just such a way that the front of the mechs *peeled back*. Contrary to some random thought by a layman looking at the mechs...the pilots of the Behemoth were in *the rear* of the mech, nothing but armor and this specifically design breaching mechanism at the front. Now, as they shuddered and groaned to a halt...they were faced with the carved black stone of the Citadel, protected by a crumpled tunnel of armor panels.

Izumi had only a moment to realize the Citadel's outer wall was grotesquely carved into scenes of torture and slavery...before Anan Kurose, better known as the Pro Heroine Thirteen, was expelled from Fat Gum, who had protected her through the rough final moments of impact. All ten finger caps of the Heroine's suit *plus* a palm feature that had been added just for this, popped open as she directed Black Hole at the fortress wall. While her Quirk wasn't *quite* a true black hole, it was something *frighteningly close*, and the wall resisted for barely a moment before *disintegrating* under the assault. It was *thick*, it ultimately taking Anan over three minutes to chew through nearly *thirty additional meters* of black stone.

Yet, chew through it she did...along with a first wave of monsters and Zilts that vanished under the effects of her Quirk.

Thirteen shuddered at that, even as she capped her Quirk. Izumi didn't blame her, the gentle woman *hated* the idea of killing, even if she'd done so more than once since the Invasion started. Still, right now her courage in getting them this far was all that was needed. Izumi, fully transformed, was the first through the opening Anan had created, Virtuous Contract ruthlessly swiping, blades of energy scything through more of the enemy. She wasn't holding back, and the fact that these were *all* Elites didn't stop them from falling like so much chaff as she pushed forward.

The Battle for the Citadel had begun...

Chapter 155: Slog

All Might grimaced, blood flying from the Spiked Aetherite knuckles that Izumi and Momo had recently provided him. Their gift had been thoughtful, in a way, as he wasn't trained to fight with a weapon. At the same time, they represented everything he *hated* about this war. He'd killed before the Invasion, of course. It happened to any Pro Hero if they fought villains long enough and at a high enough level. Yet, prior to the *literal alien invasion*, his 'kill count' had been under twenty. Each of which he'd considered a *personal failure*, as he hadn't been strong enough or good enough to stop shot of killing his foe.

Now, he'd lost track of how many he'd killed and how much blood he'd been bathed in.

It was *necessary*, the *entirety of humanity* was being threatened with either annihilation or enslavement. He did *not*, **would not**, regret his choice to fight and kill. At the same time, and particularly after it had been proven that many of those he'd killed were themselves slave soldiers, he lost a piece of himself with every dead 'monster.' A de-humanizing title that was valuable for the war effort, but which he couldn't bring himself to really believe now that he'd gotten to know many

‘monsters’ that were fighting with the rebellion. He wasn’t sure what their non-human allies *should* be called, mind you. Yet calling them ‘monsters’ didn’t feel right any longer.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed on, leading his assault team farther into the Dark Citadel. He couldn’t afford to lose focus, some of the resistance they were starting to meet were the sort of enemy Elites that caused even him a bit of trouble. He’d get his team through this. They would capture or kill the enemy leadership. Then, hopefully, this accursed war would finally be over...

... ..

Momo thought it was probably a bad sign that she felt almost nothing as she ripped a dozen Elites apart with One for All infused Black Whip. Yet, the truth, a truth only her therapist knew so far, was that she’d found herself becoming increasingly *numb* to death. The months away from the front lines, seeing aforementioned therapist, had helped a little. Getting the chance to befriend a lot of ‘monster’ races while she worked on the manufacturing centers of captured imperial cities had helped more. Yet neither could really change the fact that, when across from someone she’d mentally labeled ‘enemy,’ she no longer felt much at all when she killed them.

She needed this war to be over, she distantly thought, even as she killed an Elite that would have given All Might difficulty by simply ramming tentacles down its throat and ripping it apart from the inside. The foolish thing shouldn’t have wasted breath *roaring*. That had only made it easier for her to kill it. Stepping past its corpse without anger, feeling only dismissive coldness, she was aware that some of those in her assault team were looking at her with *concerns*.

Just a little farther, a little longer, and she could be *done with this*. She was so *tired*. She just wanted to go home with Izumi and Kyoka, cuddle under the covers, and wait for the world to make sense again. All that stood between her and that was these foolish, stupid, moronic and evil ‘Zilts.’ Very well. She’d tear all of them apart so she could have her peace again. Even if she wasn’t entirely sure she would know what to do with it any longer, once she had it in hand...

... ..

2B was *displeased* at being separated from Izumi for the assault. Yet, there were only so many high-level fighters that could single handedly lead the Behemoth assault squads, intended to silence defensive guns and open breeches for the far greater number of troops swarming in their wake. With the latest surge in Izumi’s QE capacity, caused by nearly killing herself in the assault on Iztiliana, combined with making a copy of her original body...the drain caused by her inhabiting said body remotely was minimal. Which meant she’d been drafted into fighting separate from her sister, just as Momo and Izumi had also been split up.

At least there were plenty of enemies to register her displeasure with.

Despite having become more ‘human’ than any android before her, she was not struggling at all with moral issues regarding their enemies. Not the way she knew others were. At the end of the day, YoRHa androids, indeed virtually *all* androids made by her original reality’s version of humanity, had been created for one singular reason.

Defend humanity.

As such, she and the other YoRHa androids with her were at peace with the slaughter as they pushed their way deeper into the Dark Citadel. Two of their number had gone down already, and resistance was stiffening up enough to slow them down. Yet, from her comms, she knew the first Doomtreaders were now making use of the breach behind them, meaning they'd soon have the preponderance of firepower needed to keep making headway.

One way or another, this would be finished today. Even if the bleeding corpse of a headless Empire would likely continue to fight on until it bled out afterwards...

... ..

Lieutenant Kwalski was, despite the environmental systems of his Doomreader still weakly trying to help, panting and sweating. It had been over five hours of hellish fighting since he first entered the breach created by A2 and her Lions. He'd caught glimpses of the famous android from time to time during the slog of hallway-to-hallway, building-to-building fighting they'd been engaged in. Even *she* was showing signs of damage, her artificial skin torn away in a few places to show the skeleton beneath, even as she continued to throw herself into the worst of the fighting over and over again.

His own Doomreader had taken a beating. One of the legs wasn't working quite right, glitching every third step. His right arm had lost thirty percent of its mobility as well, and the only reason he hadn't run out of either power or ammo was that regular infantry coming up behind them had been tasked to resupply him. He'd killed...dozens? Hundreds? He wasn't even sure any longer, with everything blurring together into a fog of hell. He *was* sure that the arm damage had come from a particularly large Zilt, wielding something like a naginata. Those bastards were *not* squishy armchair commanders. They were fast as greased lightning in a lunge, and tough enough not to *die* properly when you shot them even with a Doomreader's mounted guns.

Thank God and goodness that he'd qualified as a power armor pilot! He'd seen way too many of the more normal infantry get slaughtered over the last hour, and had to check his fire repeatedly when some of the rebel monsters had gotten into the fray. He was *pretty sure* he hadn't shot any of their own, but only because of the IFF system installed in his armor. If not for that, he was certain he'd have accidentally killed that one Ogre that had snuck up behind him, carrying *ammo* for him, but having pretty much scared the piss out of him when he'd tapped him on the shoulder...

... ..

Izumi was exhausted, but not as badly as she'd been after Iztiliana. With that experience to call upon, she'd made it a point to rest and recover twice. First once the wave of Doomtreaders took over the brunt of fighting after first arriving, and then a second time when the entire assault wave had paused for breath outside the government complex they were now attacking. From what they'd been able to discover, *this* was where the remaining Zilt Elders were holding out, and she could detect the signals of others she knew as they collectively pushed through toward the Main Audience Chamber. All Might, Momo, and Miruko, A2, Stars and Stripes, and Endeavor were all close, along with a half dozen high-level combatants she didn't know from other countries. 2B's

mobile platform had been destroyed half an hour ago, so she was back with Izumi, supporting her with a pair of Pods.

“There are the doors! Push! Push! Clear the area in front of them for the heavies!”

The call out came from a battered Doomtreader, half broken and squawking the ID of Lieutenant Kwalski, of the *Polish Armed Forces*, of all groups. Of course, he was part of the Terran Alliance joint military now, but Izumi could see his service files at a glance. She'd long since fallen near-permeantly into a mild hypercognition, just to keep up with the chaos of battle, making such observations about those around her an idle thing as she continued to fight.

Of course, *she* was one of those heavies, and soon found the troops around her deliberately carving an opening for it. She pushed forward, meeting up with All Might, Momo, and Cathleen just before the massively reinforced doors. All Might centered them, grim voice taking command.

“On three! One, two, three! Plus Ultra *SMASH!*”

All Might's haymaker was joined by a blow by a Black Whip surrounded and enhanced arm from Momo, a brutal *lance* thrust from the battered Black Aetherite weapon they'd given to Cathleen before the battle, and a shining Virtuous Dignity from Izumi. All four strikes hit around the center of the massive door...and the door *cracked*, but didn't break. A repeat, complete with callout from All Might, finished the job, shattering the doors inwards, even as vicious fire poured back out. Momo and Cathleen tanked it, Cathleen having made herself invulnerable and Momo having surrounded herself in a Black Whip Golem. All Might and Izumi seamlessly flowed in behind them, with their collective mentor launching a pressure wave and Izumi brute forcing a wave of telekinetic power.

Very few of those within the chamber went down to those attacks. No one *here* was that weak. But it did force them back, giving them space to advance. Exhausted but determined, Izumi engaged *Berserk* for extra damage, even as Cathleen changed a *rule* and started practically ripping apart one of the largest Zilts she'd seen yet. More combatants spilled in behind them, even as Izumi threw her entire self into a spear thrust that penetrated the armor of another Zilt Elder and cored through his heart...which didn't actually *kill* the bastard immediately, with him *smacking her into a wall* hard enough to stun her before his body gave out and he finally died.

Even as she pulled herself out of the wall, Izumi swapped to Virtuous Contract to deal with the increasingly chaotic melee as more of their own forces piled into the room. She saw Miruko bouncing off the face of one Zilt, leaving a foot-shaped mark, and followed up with a charge. Just a little longer now, and it would finally be over.

To her shock, when her sword removed the head of what she would eventually discover was the Zilt Emperor himself, the rest of the Elite Guard threw down their arms. The very first Zilts to *surrender*. Apparently, Miruko really knew how to pick them. Though the Battle Bunny might be *pissed* at Izumi later when she learned Izumi has stolen her kill, and that kill had been Chief Asshole himself...

Chapter 156: Epilogue

-Six Months Post Battle of the Citadel-

It was over. Izumi, Momo, and Kyoka melted together in relief as they watched the newscast. While none of *them* had taken the front lines again since the death of the Zilt Emperor, the fighting across Ziltmach and Earth had continued. It had become *disorganized*, and an increasing number of *factions* had formed among their enemies, as often fighting each other as the Terran Alliance. Yet, even so, and even with the Guild and Heroes slowly reclaiming Earth from roving bands of monsters, it had still taken six months for the planet of Ziltmach to fall entirely.

Technically, that wasn't the end of the Empire.

Practically, the war was over, which is what the newscast was explaining to the masses.

Without Ziltmach to act as a hub for the various World Gates, it would be nearly impossible for any one faction of the remaining Empire to assault Earth again. Some, like the Formians, might well pop up again in the future if they figured out how to target rifts on Earth...and they *were* still launching raids on Ziltmach. Those raids, however, were mostly a problem for the new government of Ziltmach, the Free Republic of Kin. The Republic, which the Terran alliance had been helping build out of the various city states, was slowly taking over ruling of the planet, and had formed its own military out of the various rebel groups.

The Terran Alliance thankfully weren't idiots, and were intent on continuing to support the new Republic. They would *much* rather fight incursions from Empire factions on Ziltmach, not Earth. Though it would likely be years yet before they could completely clear every enemy on Earth, if they could ever manage it at all. Too many groups of 'monsters' had, when they'd realized that they were losing and the Empire had effectively fallen, done the smart thing and retreated into various mountain ranges or other easy-to-hide in places. It was entirely too likely that there would still be occasional raids to deal with decades or centuries from now.

But it wasn't *their* war any longer.

Well, not Izumi and Momo's anyway. While both of them had been granted honorary status as Heroes and were reserve members of both a city militia and the Terran Defense Forces, the truth was they were now tied up largely in trying to ride the momentum of all the space efforts. The war had broken the centuries long dead period for space exploration. With asteroid mining, a moon base, and numerous orbital foundries in place, they were over the hump of getting a space program really going. As much as both had wanted to be Heroes, the truth was they were tired of fighting, and the idea of bringing a new Age of Exploration to humanity was much more appealing to them than returning to UA and getting properly licensed as Heroes.

Kyoka was a different story, of course. She'd never actually *left* the Hero Course, and had recently *graduated* as a fully licensed Pro Hero...who had set up her new Agency on Habitat 3. Which, as it happened, was where they were all now relaxing in the spacious quarters Momo and Izumi had built into the newest orbital station for themselves. Kyoka's agency, which specialized in equipping Heroes for the unique challenges of Heroing in Space, was one of the first recognized by the Terran Alliance, rather than an individual country. The Alliance *had* managed to hold together so far, entirely displacing the United Nations, and becoming something close to a true global government.

It was something that a lot of the powers that be were pushing. For reasons that hadn't existed in the past.

After all, if there were *extradimensional* alien species...what about ones native to *their own home galaxy*? The fact that many of the worlds the Empire of Kurrick had captured were determined to *not* be alternate Earths supported this possibility. Particularly given that all of them *were* somewhere within the Milky Way. Meaning that alternate versions of the very same species might well exist '*locally*,' out there among the stars. Call it paranoia if you wanted, but the Terran Alliance had decided it was better to assume they were *not* alone, and to prepare for that fact. Something that made Izumi and Momo happy, as it meant plenty of continuing support for the growing space infrastructure, even beyond the profits to be had from making things like Aetherite that required Zero Gravity environments.

The world was healing, and so were they, looking forward once more to a future bright with possibilities...

... ..

-One Year After War's End-

"...And so I pronounce you wife, wife, and wife! May your marriage be as Plus Ultra as your life has been so far!"

Kyoka giggled at All Might's antics, even as Izumi dipped Momo into a kiss...before both of them captured Kyoka and did the same. It was a very small gathering that was there to witness the triple marriage, something that the Terran Alliance had made legal, even if local laws down on Earth still varied. Japan was a little too conservative still, despite it making major strides in the last year under the firm will of a populace that had *adapted* during what was now being called the 'Rift War.' When the Japanese government had tried to go back to 'more of the same,' they'd found an unamused populace...and a Terran Alliance that was willing to stick its thumb on the scale when the alternative was potential *rioting*. As a result, the old men in charge of Japan had failed to return to the status quo, a new and unknown future still in flux as younger generations bucked tradition and pushed for more freedoms.

Japan was growing out of its stagnation, but it would likely be a while yet before it allowed poly marriages of three women. Thankfully, the Midoriyas, along with Kyoka and Momo, had all shifted their residence to orbit. Momo, Izumi and Kyoka all worked up here full time, after all, and Inko had wanted to be near her children. All of which meant that they could marry legally under Terran Alliance law, keeping to a small ceremony as all of them had grown to somewhat detest the fame Izumi and Momo had gathered during the war. They would and did use it for good, but they didn't really *like* the attention and the lack of privacy it brought them.

For now, as everyone gathered to congratulate the trio, they all basked in managing to get this warm moment to themselves, with all of those that mattered most to them gathered around. Thankfully, the Jirous and Yaoyorozus had been entirely supportive of their relationship...even if the Yaoyorozus were already talking about procedures and Quirks that could allow one or more of them to have children!

... ..

Setsuna yawned, covering her mouth with a detached hand, even as she stretched in a way only someone with her Quirk or a rubber spine could manage. She reflected idly on the fact she was still Guild Mistress, not of all Japan, as she filed away the day's paperwork. Honestly, she'd expected after the Rift War was over that the need for the Guild would die out. Instead, the Guild had absorbed part of the militia system, with the rest going to the police. While monster hunting was still a *thing*, and likely would be for years yet, the Guild was slowly transitioning into a broader organization under her and Mina. One that both acted as a replacement for the old HPSC, tying Hero agencies together, and provided manpower for larger Heroic operations.

That they were also being approached as a sort of temp agency to act as intermediates between people with useful Quirks and jobs that could use them, was admittedly a bit more unexpected. *That* was Mina's work, with the pink girl having regained at least some of her zest for life and decided that she wasn't going to 'let the Guild die.' Taking advantage of loosening laws about Quirk Usage, she'd gotten the Guild in on the process of licensing people for public use of various job-related Quirks. Healers, performers, and even those with Quirks that helped build new things. All could now work through the Guild to connect with the people that needed them. With the Guild acting as guarantor for both ends of the contract.

Setsuna didn't hate it, even if it certainly wasn't what she'd thought she would be doing with her life. If nothing else, the idea taking on a life of its own seemed to have pulled Mina back from the brink, for which she could only be grateful. Though she still hadn't managed to get her friend-with-benefits to consider dating again. Oh well, those benefits were nice anyway, even if the two of them didn't really click romantically. Bakugo had chilled out somewhat since becoming Japan's number one Raid Team Leader and Toru had been hinting that she wanted to bring someone else into their relationship. Maybe she could push Mina that way? Well, something would work out, sooner or later, she was sure...

... ..

-Ten Years After War's End-

Chief Administrator Saiko Intelli smiled as she hugged 21O to her. The android-woman blushed but didn't resist, still not quite used to public displays of affection from *her* human, despite the fact they'd been married for several years. Intelli's position as the person in charge of *all* civilian space going traffic and habitats of the Sol system had gotten them a front row seat in the observation area for Doctors Midoriya and Yaoyorozu's latest test.

The two women hadn't been content with their work during the Rift War, going on to push boundaries in a dozen fields. Not just space travel and the science of Quirk Energy, but everything from medicine to agriculture as well. Though, admittedly, almost all of it came back to their understanding and development of the Quirk Energy field. They had, for example, managed to replicate a Quirk that could rewind the state of an organic object in order to develop a near-universal trauma healing device...as well as reverse aging.

Of course, they'd never left off pushing forward with space exploration. In fact, as a 'cure' for old age had been found, they'd only emphasized all the more strongly how important it would be in

the future. The Earth wasn't anywhere near capacity...*right now*. The Quirk Wars and Era of Chaos, then the Rift War just for good measure, had reduced human population to the point that they weren't exactly running out of room on good old Terra.

Yet, with age no longer being guaranteed to shuffle people off life clockwork, *sooner or later*, overpopulation would be an issue. Colonization of the moon, as well as fledgling colonies now on Mars, were a partial answer...but Izumi and Momo had never been the type to think so *small*. Which is what today's test was all about. Out the viewport everyone could see their latest brainchild, a *starship* with hard emphasis on 'star.' As in, it was meant to travel them on more than a local level.

She was, in fact, here to watch them test a prototype FTL drive. One they apparently had high confidence in. Just as she reflected on that, amazed as always with what the two were capable of, Momo stood up from where she'd been hunched over a console with Izumi. She turned to the crowd with a brilliant smile and spoke.

"Thank you all for coming here today! As you all know, today is the remote test of our potential Faster Than Light drive, which uses principles of dimensional transference learned from studying Rifts, to potentially *fold space* through a higher dimensional, allowing for apparent FTL travel. This has, notably, *already succeeded* in small scale testing. This test, using the corvette-sized *Fleetwing*, is to confirm the technology scales."

There were murmurs in the crowd at that. Apparently, some of those in the observation booth *weren't* aware that this had worked at small scale already. Which was fair, given that the pair of geniuses had kept that fact fairly quite while modifying *Fleetwing*.

"Without farther ado, the test is to begin in thirty seconds! So I suggest you pay attention."

That got more startled noises, as everyone abruptly sat up at attention, Momo ignoring them all to turn and face the viewport. The entire test was automated, and a timer had appeared with her announcement, so it was merely a matter of a tense, excited half minute before...something *like* the Rifts everyone was familiar with was projected before the ship. Yet, its appearance was different, almost mirror or gem like instead of a chaotic spill of light. *Fleetwing* surged toward it...and vanished. Everyone waited with bated breath.

"Contact! Quatum-comm buoy 12 is reporting arrival of *Fleetwing*! Total elapsed time...1.37 seconds. Confirmed, effective Faster Than Light transit!"

Intelli's smile was nearly as huge as Momo and Izumi's were. After all, she understood just how big that simply statement was. The target had been just a bit past the orbit of Mars. Not where the planet was *now*, but on its orbital track. It had *started* not too far from Lagrange 3. Meaning a trip that would have taken *Light* over twelve minutes...had been crossed in 1.37 seconds. That wasn't just *minorly* faster than light. It was a *major* FTL leap.

The two geniuses had done it again, and suddenly the very stars were open to mankind at last. The future tomorrow held was looking brighter than Intelli had ever imagined, and she knew the two *she* considered responsible for it. Now, she just needed to see if she could get tickets to ride the first ship that went extra-solar to explore the galaxy, current position be damned. She wasn't going to miss the next great adventure of humanity if *she* had anything to say about it...

<<The End>>