

My Hero Automata

Chapters 86-89

Novus Peregrine

Chapter 86: Counter Force

Izumi had needed to spend several days focused on helping entirely too many different groups of people get worldwide production of her RADS arrays going. There had been a nigh-infinite seeming sea of questions. What materials could be used, if certain materials could be substituted, how much the arrays could be scaled up or down, what the effects of containing them inside vehicles would be. Power ratios, manufacturing tolerances, margins of error in the designs, the streams of questions had never seemed to end.

Only two things had kept her sane among the deluge of questions-of-variable-intelligence. The first was that her answers were yielding *results*. Already, the larger industrial powerhouses like the United States and the Republic of China were pumping out hundreds of RADS arrays a day. It was a tiny fraction of what they would need, of course. Particularly when the electrical power needed to actually use them all was quickly going to become just as big an issue as making the arrays themselves. But it was still serious progress. Serious progress that was already having *noticeable* effects as arrays were deployed. A particularly clever think tank in North American had even figured out how to use them in the agricultural heartlands that had so far been such an issue to properly support. Instead of trying to shield vast areas, they clever bastards had used the arrays to intentionally shift the local QE currents.

The entire problem with tackling rural Rifts was the relatively low population densities. By the time someone even *noticed* the monsters, they'd already scattered everywhere, often even having collected enough energy to turn a Rift into a Gate. But that same low population density meant that the QE fields in those areas were mostly the result of global QE 'currents' shifting QE into relative 'low pressure' zones. The clever think tank had deliberately placed a bunch of arrays so that they caused those QE currents to narrow down to a focal point. That, in turn, caused an artificially high area of QE density while lowering the density for hundreds of kilometers around that one 15 km focal zone. The result had been attracting virtually every rift in the entire state of Iowa to that one area, making it *far* easier to intercept and manage them. It was an admittedly ingenious idea that Izumi hadn't thought of herself, with Japan not really having the same vast empty spaces to deal with.

The point was, she was seeing progress. But Better yet for her sanity was the second thing keeping her sane. While they hadn't been willing to pull Momo off combat rotation to help her, *Jirou* had been rotated off front-line duty. Those rotations were new, something only possible because they were beginning to claw back enough control that Nedzu had insisted on trying to rest people between combat actions, trying to prevent combat fatigue from building up too quickly.

In the first days, in the emergency scramble right as the invasion started, it had been a case of 'all hands on deck, all the time, 25 hours a day.' As the prediction algorithms had begun to work, as more and more siphons had become available, as better team structures and more viable tactics had been slowly put into place, that had *needed* to change. If they'd kept up with the

original, they'd have been faced with more and more of their own forces shifting from 'combat stress reaction' symptoms into outright PTSD. Any soldier or hero that ended up going into full PTSD was effectively killed in action as far as the pragmatic numbers of war went. Which meant Nedzu *and* the JSDF higher ups had pushed as quickly as possible to transition to a combat rotation instead of constant action for all.

Frankly, that rotation was still too short. There were still too many fires in too many places around the world. But they *had* managed to institute mandatory rest cycles for most of the younger and less experienced combatants on the Heroics side, at least. Which, in this case, had included Jirou. The punk girl had spent the first day of her 'rest cycle' with her parents, but said parents had been forced from their home and into more secured housing without a lot of space. Their home was *fine*, it was just currently located in a high danger zone. The 'more secure housing' was a stadium that had gone through rapid Quirk-based reconfiguration into housing for those displaced by damage or danger. It was nothing like the desperate tent cities that had been set up in the first few days of the invasion in similar locations. But it was still cramped, with the couple only having a 2.5-meter by 2.5-meter temporary room that included both sleeping and bathing facilities.

As a result, Jirou had been faced with either returning to the mostly empty dorms at UA...or taking up the standing offer Izumi and Momo had given her to crash at their safehouse/workshop. To Izumi's delight, the punk girl had decided on the latter. Izumi was *fairly* certain either Momo or 2B had asked her to do it, which might have slightly conflicted with the whole 'supposed to be resting' thing. But however it had come about, Izumi was *incredibly* grateful that the other girl had been there to both vent about stupid questions to and cuddle with.

Mostly, she really appreciated the cuddles. Also, the fact that there seemed to now be an unspoken cuddle-agreement in place. Progress toward infinite Jirou headpats acquired! Admittedly, it was that extremely awesome cuddling that was making Izumi very reluctant to get up from her most recent face-plant into their super-poofy couch, though. Just because Izumi didn't need much *sleep*, didn't mean she couldn't be mentally exhausted, and she was an *introvert* darn it! The fastest way to drain her mental batteries was to make her deal with people! She'd been doing way, way too much of that lately!

Thankfully, her fellow-introvert in Jirou understood, and let her cling for a silent recharge until the last minute, when Izumi *had* to leave for an important meeting she'd been called in for. Reluctantly letting go of her new second-favorite recharge station (Jirou was a great little spoon! But Momo's momos were the best recharge station! She was sure Jirou would agree!) Izumi trudged to the door and smacked her face twice to psych herself up. At least the ridiculous amount of QE being harvested by siphons meant she could afford to just fly over to UA instead of having to call for their still-rather-battered car...

Izumi looked on in shock, for once not the central focus of attention. Instead, that honor belonged to a non-descript man who was presenting them with the unbelievable. Unlike their usual conference table, everyone who was attending the briefing this 'meeting' had turned out to be, were all facing a large holoscreen. The man, a holo projection himself, 'stood' in front of the screen as the

main display cycled through a slideshow of a city on their enemy's planet. The *inside* of the city and the many people there.

“As you can see, the initial efforts by various Hero groups were an inspiration. A new task force, created from agents and planners of a dozen intelligence agencies, has run with the initial recon successes by joint Heroics and Military efforts. In particular, Taskforce Counter took note that the primary limitation on getting things through invasion Gates appears to be some sort of electromagnetic interference. This is backed up by the groups studying various phenomenon related to the Rifts. With the most detailed data yet having been provided by Midoriya Izumi and the Gajajima Island teams.”

He paused to nod an acknowledgement Izumi's way, causing her to blush as attention shifted to her for a brief moment. She *still* wasn't used to that and might never be. Thankfully, the non-descript man quickly continued and the collective focus shifted back toward him.

“Much like the few who had already succeeded, we dug into the past for solutions. In our case, we had the collective institutional records of several agencies to work with, giving us more options to choose from. We quickly came to the conclusion that our best bet for a more advanced and reliable recon solution was to slip *parts* of various older technologies through enemy Gates. After casting a *very* wide net for operatives that would be able to sneak through Gates, we created stealth recon teams, several of whom have Quirks that would let them take other people or items through with them. In example, a Quirk that lets the user shrink themselves and other people for a set duration.”

The slideshow behind the man stopped cycling, replaced in a quick flicker with a new image. The enemy city was visible out a slanted stone window...but the more interesting bit was the foreground, which showed what appeared to be a listening post of sorts. Manual telescopes, directional listening devices that were obviously crude-but-functional. Everything was very function-over-form.

“Our expanded teams managed to establish three separate listening posts, two located by cities and a third near an enemy Rift creation site. In addition to monitoring tools, they've been able to use a combination of Quirks and assembled-on-site hardware to transfer gathered data into an old format known as a compact disc, which uses laser etching in polycarbonate to store data. These are then snuck back through gates by various means, allowing the listening post teams to slowly fill us in on gathered data. Data which includes careful scouting expeditions *inside* the enemy cities.”

There was a hungry feeling to the room's atmosphere. So far, they'd been working with bare snippets of data, stolen out of the jaws of impossibility by clever tricks. Finally, they were going to get some *real* information. Which was an important step toward turning this clusterfuck around. Know thyself and know thy enemy were still two of the most critical pillars of warfare, after all.

“First off, due to providing several people with translation Quirks sufficient samples, we've now got a crude translation for the main language our enemy uses. Which, in turn, means we now know who our enemy *is*. They are the Empire of Kurrick. A trans dimensional empire that has, in

fact, already conquered 17 other worlds. The world we are connected to is their home world, from which they always seem to launch their campaigns. The World of Ziltmach...”

There was a stir, a tightening of focus. Their enemy had a *name*. Moreover, they had confirmation this wasn't their first try at conquering a world. Given how well executed it had been, the military minds had suspected as much. But this was *confirmation*.

“As all of you might already be thinking, this is part of where the insane diversity of the invaders comes from. Many of the attacking ‘monsters’ are simply mutated versions of animals native to an already conquered world. Moreover, virtually all of the more intelligent enemies are slave or servant races, who had been either indoctrinated or bribed into answering to the original race. So far, we haven't actually figured out what the Zilts, the species in overall rulership, look like. Their first conquered species, which is now their highest servant cast and largely in charge of conquest, is a familiar one however.”

The holoscreen shifted again to show two Lizardmen. They were one of the intelligent ‘monster races’ that all front-line combatants had likely run into by now. They were never the first through the Rifts, but they were one of the most commonly seen species to perform the sacrifices that stabilized Rifts into Lesser Gates. Given the way most of the other species seemed to take orders from them, there had already been a suspicion that they outranked most of the other monsters. This seemingly confirmed that idea, at least for now.

The two images were, according to the data displayed, showing the two genders of the species. To be honest, there wasn't that much visible difference. Both had mottled brown-green skin and an only roughly humanoid frame. Digitigrade legs, clawed feet, and equally clawed hands. Roughly scaled flesh and a snout-like face full of sharp teeth. The major difference between male and female seemed to be that the females were significantly larger and had a crest of feathers that swept back along the top of their heads. Izumi had seen those feathers before, but not thought to consider what the difference had been at the time.

“They seem to have been folded entirely into the Kurrick Empire at this point, enjoying their power as the primary hatchet people of the enemy. That, however, *isn't* the case with every species. We've picked up quite a few whispers that several of the more recently conquered species still having ongoing rebellions.”

The displayed image shifted, showing several other species. Included, to Izumi's interest, was the Ogre species that often served as Mid-Level Elites with the more recent Rift and Gate openings.

“Conquered worlds, so far as we can tell, remain ‘harvesting’ worlds, where the populace is harvested for their QE value. Something that occurs until all rebellion ceases. Obviously, something of a major, if brutal, incentive for each populace to turn on their own rebellions as the body counts pile up. Better to be slaves that can work their way up to being valued servants, than be outright harvested like animals. That's the narrative that the Zilts and their armies seem to push the moment they have enough control.”

There was quiet cursing all around as that processed for a lot of people. Thankfully, this briefing was almost entirely for military and Heroics personnel, so it was quickly brought under control.

“As I’m sure many of you are already putting together, service as Elites is one way for a species to work their way up the caste system, trying to convince the Zilts to transition them from harvesting worlds to slave worlds, or slave worlds to servant worlds. The worlds that still have open rebellions, however, may be of use to us later. In particular, that is due to the next point of information I have to bring up. Packets on what we’ve found will be given to everyone to analyze, but to keep this meeting reasonable, I need to move onto the possible plan of action we’ve developed based on all of this new intelligence.”

The holoscreen images shifted again, this time moving away from displaying races or cities, and back to enemy Rift creation site that was under observation. Abruptly, the still image turned into video and a specific set of Lizardfolk were highlighted. As the clip played, several exclamations sounded throughout the room as waving gestures created a far more stable-looking Rift than anything they’d seen so far, even from stabilized *Gates*. The Lizardfolk were quick to move through the new mini-Rift, which was barely tall enough for them...and to everyone’s surprise the video shifted to another clip which showed that a camera was *following* them.

The camera, shockingly enough, didn’t die as it passed through the far more stable-looking rift. When it came out the other side, the Lizardfolk were already moving, having not broken stride. Whoever was playing spy quickly slunk behind them, following them through what seemed to be some sort of carved-stone passage. There were a few side passages, but the Lizardfolk ignored them, and thus so did the spy. Instead, they headed straight to an open room, a circle perhaps 10 meters across. Hovering in the center of the room, over a stone plinth, was a glowing blood red gem perhaps the size of All Might’s head. It was surrounded by ritualistic looking spikes, with pulses of energy flowing from the stone down the spikes at irregular intervals.

The Lizardfolk split up, going to a half dozen places around the room, and the holoscreen froze. The non-descript man brought all of their attention back to him by speaking a moment later.

“This was one of three risky but informative trips taken into what turned out to be the local command and control post for this Rift creation site. From what our team could gather, that gem in the center is called a Harvest Stone. Its job it to do just what it says in the name, to Harvest QE for the Kurrick empire to use. *However*, more critical to our planned operation, it’s *also* the most critical piece of their Rift creating process. They draw collected energy from the Harvest Stone to create their side of the Rifts they open...and thus it represents the first true weak point we’ve found in their logistics.”

There was a quiet sort of stir at that, as every eye locked on the man.

“That small Rift they open each time appears to be the only way to access the stone, but the stones are *by far* the most important thing we can currently get at. They are, from what we could determined by translating everything the Lizards said, *extremely* costly to make and charge. Thus, our goal is audacious. Using what we’ve learned about Rift stabilization, we intended to *Counter Invade* through a specific Gate, or even a series of Gates. We’ll establish a beachhead at a single

Rift creation site and hold it as long as possible. During that time, we want those experts we have that can handle field operations...”

The man nodded Izumi’s way again, making her straighten as she realized this was likely why she was part of this briefing at all.

“...We want them to attempt to open what seems to be a pocket dimension that stores the Harvest Stone and *steal it* once they do. At the same time, we’ll be launching spoiling raids at other sites, attempting to both distract the enemy and possibly destroy a few more of those stones. The end goals are to deny them this critical and expensive asset, to force them to fight on *their* territory, and to hopefully secure one of the stones for our own experts to study. With, of course, the hope that we might eventually be able to open our own Rifts. Either to the enemy home world...or to other worlds where active rebellions are going on. Rebellions we could supply to cause havoc for our mutual enemies.”

The man wound down, crossing his arms behind his back in a show that he was done. There were only a few moments of silence before a tidal wave of talk burst out, everyone wanting to ask questions, share ideas, or a dozen other things entirely...

Chapter 87: Operation Spear Tip

Preparations for the quickly named Operation Spear Tip weren’t quick. Everyone agreed it needed to be done, but it was also entirely likely they’d only get a single chance to get it right before their enemy did something to make it either extremely difficult or outright impossible to repeat. On top of the need to get it right the first time, was the simple fact that the entire world was currently still stretched brutally thin. Various problems meant to alleviate the strain were *starting* to come into effect, but the results were slow to free up assets. The teams training in the new doctrines worked out by UA were just one such tool, one that was slowly starting to free up both some Hero forces and military units. Those new tactical doctrines, and similar ones worked out by other groups, were having an effect, but not a quick one.

The same was true of Izumi’s new RADS arrays. They *were* making a difference, but it would be months before even the major cities of the world had been secured properly. Years before that security could be spread to smaller cities and towns. Recruitment efforts, including a lot of ex-criminals and villains who’d committed only minor crimes being pardoned in favor of serving in the fight, were also making a glacially slow difference. As was recruitment of vigilantes into the larger network of Heroics, along with training police and PMCs to get involved.

The result was that, despite a large number of countries committing whatever they could pry loose in terms of resources and personnel to the affair, it had taken nearly two weeks to gather a force deemed strong enough. Then it had taken *another* two weeks to hammer that force into some sort of coherent whole. Japan, being in a better position than many at this point, had managed for forward an entire carefully-chosen team. Ectoplasm, Momo, Izumi, Jirou, and Nejire represented UA. While Ryukyu, Miruko, Pixie-Bob and Mt. Lady had been selected to beef up the team with some carefully-chosen powerhouses.

Each of them had been selected to fill multiple roles. Ectoplasm could provide numbers along with a leader for the UA group. Izumi was *needed* for her expertise, with Momo being both a

powerhouse and the one most familiar with Izumi and 2B's research. Jirou was a mid-range powerhouse with all her gear upgrades at this point, while also having an enhanced sense useful for acting as a scout and early warning system. Nejire, meanwhile, acted as a more experienced powerhouse familiar with both most of the UA team *and* most of the non-UA reinforcements. Ryukyu was a calm presence, familiar with most of those going, and one of the few people Miruko would actually listen to. Pixie-Bob could help with rapid fortification building...and Mt. Lady had surprised *everyone* by getting serious and digging in deep once the invasion started. She'd proven to be a, pun very much intended, massive asset in dealing with both large enemies and large numbers alike.

Everyone would have preferred to send more, but despite being in a better position than many, Japan was still playing catch-up. The JSDF *would* be sending along some veteran support to help out as well, to beef up the Japanese contribution. In truth, despite its relatively small size, the Japanese group was one of the larger ones to show up at for the taskforce. The Americans had fielded more, but that was no shock, and they hadn't been able to spare any true heavy hitters. Lots of mid-rankers, several with fantastic support Quirks for this, but only a single fighter that could match someone like Momo or Ryukyu. And that particular hero couldn't sustain that level of fighting for long. Of course, they'd also sent seven times the military commitment, including a dedicated engineering team to help create fortifications on the other side. Other countries, like the UK, France, and China, had all managed to spare forces of various levels. Though only China had been able to field both numbers similar to Japan in Heroes, and similar to the United States in military assets.

All told, they'd managed to pull together a strike team of over fifty combat heroes, two dozen more support heroes, and almost 3,500 mixed purpose military personnel. They'd then hammered hard to work out a chain of command and get the wildly mixed units working together. It had been rough and was only likely to get rougher as they were thrown in the grinder...but every single one of them was burning for the chance to do some serious damage to their enemy. Many of them would likely crash out as soon as this was over and need to be off rotation for at least a week or two. But they were determined to get it done...

As the first wave of Operation Spear Tip charged through the Lesser Gate situated near Bristol, Izumi did her dead level best to smother her annoyance that she wasn't among the first through the Gate. While it might have been logical enough for her, as one of the most physically durable Heroes present, to be among that wave...they needed her here and monitoring the Gate to make sure it didn't close. They were virtually certain that both Gates and Rifts could *normally* be closed at will from the enemy's side. But that is where Izumi and the team immediately around her came in. They'd all poured over the data from the captured and disabled Greater Gate in Laos-Columbia, as well as all data they had on Rifts and Gates in general, and come up with a crude way to 'wedge' one open from their side.

At least in theory.

The fact that Izumi was one of the world's foremost experts on Quirk Energy Fields, and now also on Rifts and Gates, meant that she was glued to their jury-rigged 'doorstopper' until at least the

third wave went through. At that point, so long as the all clear came back, she'd be the first of the research team through the Gate. The others were virtually all *far* squishier than her, meaning they'd be held back until the zone was outright cleared. If that happened at all. Izumi, as a powerful Heroine in her own right, was trusted to survive while trying to force open the pocket dimension that the Lizards used to hide the Harvest Stone and the Rift control/creation apparatus.

She *hated* that she was relegated to that. She understood it fully. So much so that she couldn't even really argue the point. But *Momo* had been one of the first Heroines through, and Jirou would be going with the second wave. Having both her girlfriend and her hopefully-future-additional-girlfriend walking into the potential meatgrinder on the other side of the Gate without her was *agonizing* and she hated everything about it. She couldn't even send 2B, as while they were confident the EM issue wouldn't bother her or Izumi, they had no idea what the gulf between dimensions would do to them if they were separated from each other.

Gritting her teeth and forcing herself to focus as the instruments before her revealed that the enemy had cut power to the Gate, Izumi's smile wasn't a nice one and she tapped keys to adjust their own inputs as their 'doorstopper' took over the Gate. They had *plenty* of filled QE batteries to keep it going. Now it was just a matter of fine tuning what they were feeding it so it didn't destabilize.

"No you don't, motherfuckers. This is *our* Gate now, and you're going to have to bleed an ocean to get it back...I personally guarantee it."

Izumi immediately took to the air with a leap, using her moments above the battlefield as a way to take in the tactical situation as she came through the tamed Gate with the lead element of Wave 3. There was unquestionably still fighting going on, and she absentmindedly deployed a missile Pod to help the various fliers in the ongoing fight over the airspace here. She put half her own focus into brutally overpowered sweeps of the telekinesis to do the same thing, slamming whole groups of airborne foes into their own allies on the ground as she took in the battle as a whole.

The weight of numbers was still definitively on the defenders side, but it was clear that was rapidly changing under the onslaught the taskforce had brought with it. Ryukyu alone was utterly savaging entire units that attempted to attack her, her dragon form having been augmented since the start of the invasion by armor made using Melissa's shrinking tech. That armor, produced by Momo's Quirk then modified by Melissa, could and obviously was turning blows that would give a light tank pause. While it was dented in places, and Ryukyu had some light wounds despite its coverage, it had also turned her into a cataclysmic nightmare for the enemy. Something that was similarly true with Mount Lady's similarly armored form on the other flank. A nightmare for the Empire that was all the more evidenced by the fact both of them were still going strong, despite having been two of the very first Heroines through the Gate.

Momo was being an equal terror on another flank, and several powerhouses from other regions and nations were doing the same. With Wave 2 having included several terrain shapers like Pixie-Bob, the soldiers that made up the bulk of Wave 3 were now pouring in to man fortified earthworks and turning the tide still farther against the local monsters. Despite the battle still

raging, it was obvious that the defenders were currently *losing*, which meant Izumi's job was clear. Replacing the now-empty missile Pod with a gatling-equipped unit that had more endurance, she zeroed in on the spot where they knew the pocket dimension should be.

There, she spotted Jirou, the far more primitive sonic cannon she'd been forced to adopt to get through the EM-frying Gate punching out devastating blasts at regular intervals. The punk girl was in among a group of mid-tier emitters and tank types, all artfully staggered around the spot of the pocket dimension's entrance. They were doing their best not to make it obvious that they'd staked out that position on purpose...but it was time to cut the charade.

Izumi's next leap was far less vertical, taking her across the field and landing her right in the center of the group. A few of them twitched in a threat-reaction response, but they'd known to expect her as soon as the third wave started coming through, so no one actually fired in her direction as she landed. Without saying a word, Izumi deployed her ultimate cheat for this situation...her digitized inventory that gave not one single fuck about having crossed through an EM field.

Out came QE batteries, the best dimensional energy sensors they'd come up with so far, and a hideous combination item that all-but-glued together several of the enemy gate-opening 'ritual' daggers and a sort of bastardized frequency tuner that could help shift the daggers' combined output. If they'd gotten their guesses about how the invisible, somehow stable, Rift/Gate hidden here worked even half right, it *should* act as a skeleton key to 'pick the lock' for said dimensional entrance. Izumi threw almost all of her attention into it, even as she heard an uptick in violence nearby. Apparently, the enemy had realized what she was trying to do...but a significant chunk of the soldiers from Wave 3 had beelined for positions around her and were helping shrug off the suddenly desperate assault.

Just as Izumi got a hit, grinning viciously as she did, a pair of elite commando units with Hero support arrived to stack up behind her. She dialed in the frequencies she was getting, fine tuned them when the invisible Gate seemed to resist, then *punched* into the Gate with far more QE than their enemy's more precise usage. It did the job, a Rift opening with a flicker and a sound something like shattering pottery mixed with a dental drill whine. The stone corridor they knew to look for was suddenly visible through that rift, and the commando leaders kicked their teams into action with a shout.

Much as she *hated* it, she was still not supposed to risk herself, so she ground her teeth as the two teams went in, only following after they were all in. Each team was 10 soldiers and two heroes, and the first one divided in two as they hit the cross corridors no one knew what was down. A single hero each, with five commandos in support, split to each side and rushed onward. The second team, with Izumi trailing, continued pushing on towards the central room.

They didn't make it that far without resistance, of course...but a hallway works against both sides in some ways and the two Heroes with this commando team had been picked with malice in mind. One had a tank type Quirk that was powered up by absorbing heat, while his partner was a living *heat beam*, able to shoot raw beams of heat from any bit of her skin. The woman, whose costume as deliberately brief to allow her to fire off as many and as wide of beams as possible, *didn't bother* with aiming. She just utterly flooded the hallway forward of them with heat beams,

practically melting the Lizardfolk that were trying to stop their charge and only empowering their juggernaut of a tanky hero in the process.

The combination folded the enemy before them for the first minute, only for their living tank to finally groan in pain as a sizable lighting bolt hit him. Izumi had deployed a Pod above them and tracked that bolt back to a robe-wearing Lizard in instant it shot out...a Lizard who promptly threw up some sort of shield as the laser of her Pod pinpointed him with a heavy shot. The shield might have held up to something more normal, but Izumi's Pod laser had been charging since she deployed it. The charged shot ripped through the shield and disintegrated the Wizard Lizard's head...which finally seemed to break the resistance of the other Lizardfolk present.

They attempted to scatter, which, as the team broke out into the main chamber, was probably the stupidest thing they could have done. If they'd kept up the pressure, they *might* have been able to bottle up the assault team in the hallway exit. As it was, it just meant most of the Lizards died tired as they were shot in the back by commandos not at all interested in risking them sabotaging shit. The last living pair of Lizards *almost* made it to another entrance...only to run face first into one of the teams that had split off at the crossing corridor. With those two pasted, the entire group shifted to covering every entrance, even as Izumi raced to point every sensor she had at the Harvest Stone, trying to figure out just how risky it would be the flat out yonk the thing out of the air.

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Not risky at all, as far as she could tell. Not for *her* anyway. Anyone else would be risking QE burns if they touched the thing. Even she couldn't handle it for long, but she didn't need to. She jumped, put her palm on the stone twice the size of her head...and digitized it into her inventory. Moments later, her eyes widened as her HUD told her the pocket dimension was destabilizing.

"Time to go! This place is going to come apart in less than five minutes!"

There was much cursing from the heroes and commandos alike at that, even as everyone scrambled to exit the way they'd come in...

Chapter 88: Research and Fluff

Izumi had only been able to justify staying long enough to equip a flight unit and utterly bombard the ever living shit out of the enemy still assaulting the breach team. She'd known she would likely be chewed out for even that much, so she'd prepared beforehand a loadout that likely would have seen her in a war crimes trial if she'd used it during regular Hero work.

Missiles that had deployed cluster munitions, incendiary weapons that made napalm look positively humane, scatter-burst ordinance loaded with the nastiest acids that Mina could make for her. She's emptied a good 80 percent of her ordinance stockpile in under ten minutes...and in doing so reduced the remaining enemy forces trying to fight the breaching force by almost forty percent. All while 2B had used a fully summoned copy of her original body to utterly wreck another 25% in a way that would likely never have anyone who saw it completely comfortable in Izumi's presence again.

With their combined rage properly expressed in a way she *probably* needed to talk to her therapist about, Izumi had returned back through the Gate...though only after leaving a gift of a bunch of HSN comms and a portable HSN Hub at the now-virtually-theirs enemy rally point. Not to mention a gift of more proper support gear for some of the Heroes like Jirou that were making do with less than usual until now. There were only a few hundred basic comm sets and other basics, but Izumi's utter cheat of being able to take them across the Gates would only be added on to by Momo once she wasn't needed for the direct fighting. Their people, including the hundreds of stealth ops troops that would be scattering in every direction while they still had control of the Gate, would now have fully modern comm gear and other surveillance hardware. All of it encrypted to HSN standards.

As for Izumi herself, however, she'd been forced to retreat back through the Gate with the Harvest Stone. Not just because of her orders, either. The bloody thing was emitting *so much* QE that her inventory was slowly starting to glitch from containing it. Something neither she nor 2B had even been aware was *possible*. Suffice it to say, the very moment they got to the secure, armored truck intended to carry the thing to a lab, Izumi had unloaded it. Then breathed a huge sigh of relief as her inventory started to stabilize. Given it had burned her hand getting it back out of her inventory, she'd very pointedly gotten a ride in a *different* truck, thank you very much, on the way to the lab.

Now, she stared at the Harvest Stone as the unbelievable readings displayed on dozens of screens, experts all around her. David Shield had even come personally from I-Island, being one of the few individuals worldwide nearly as well versed in Quirk Energy Theory as she was. It was Dr. Shield that spoke now, expressing the disbelief all of them were feeling.

"That's not some sort of *containment* stone. It's, literally, crystallized Quirk Energy. Distilled down to its most concentrated form, then shielded in some fashion so that it's only leaking a fraction of what it should. Izumi, how in the hell did you survive *touching* it?"

Izumi huffed. She was in just as much shock as the rest of them. More, really. This wasn't really even QE anymore. It was properly MASO as 2B's original world had known it, rather than the diluted version that was QE. A solidified chunk of MASO energy that could probably have supplied an entire army of YoRHa grade androids. Assuming even YoRHa would have known how to make use of *solidified* Maso. Was this the sort of concentrations that had existed in those two beings whose destruction had set everything off in 2B's home dimension?

"I only touched it for a brief moment. Remember, my Quirk absorbs QE to fuel itself. So, at least for contact that brief, by own absorption cut it down to something survivable. I had QE burns on my palm afterward, which healed extremely slowly by my standards. In fact, they haven't fully faded yet."

Izumi turned her right palm up, showing Dr. Shield that, indeed, her palm was the sort of faint red you see from a mild sunburn.

"It was a fair bit worse right after I touched it for the second time. Like someone fair skinned who completely forgot sun lotion at the beach and fell asleep for a few hours."

Shield grimaced at that. An understandable reaction, given that it meant anyone *but* Izumi was going to need to go to a *lot* more effort to steal one of these things. It was entirely possible this was the only one they'd get to study for quite a while.

Dr. Eritz Van Listeborg, a German genius who had been studying natural Quirk Energy Fields before the invasion, was the next to speak up.

"However she got it, the question is what the scheiße we *do* with it. Did you at least get scans of everything around the pocket dimension they were using before it collapsed?"

Izumi nodded, not taking the slightly rude, biting tone in his voice personally. That was really just his personality. Instead of responding with her own rudeness, she waved her hand towards one set of screens, drawing attention to them as she transmitted the footage she'd been taking of the entire area. Over a few seconds, she edited them in near real-time, taking snap shots of individual parts of the various apparatuses that she'd seen, thankful she'd summoned her visor to make clear recordings of everything she saw.

All of the scientists quickly crowded around that set of monitors, murmuring over them. One of them, whose name Izumi had yet to learn but who she knew had been involved in disassembling the Greater Gate from Laos-Columbia, pointed to a single screen and spoke up.

"There! That's one of the main sequences we found on the Greater Gate. This one is more complex, but it's undeniably the same sequence, just with added bits and repetition. A control cluster of some sort, maybe?"

Several heads nodded, and a Scottish scientist, Alastair Allardice, pointed at another set of carved runes.

"An' that! That looks a lot like the sequence we've seen on aw' the Ritual artifacts the Lizards use tae turn Rifts intae Gates. Not quite the same, but it's bloody close."

His accent made Izumi's mind twitch just a bit, but she'd already worked with him quite a bit on the Gajajima island disaster, so she'd learned to parse it well enough. He was also, she noted, right. There *were* differences, but if she was right about those...

"Probably meant for forcing Rifts open instead of Gates. I learned a bit more when I was using our little interdimensional lockpick. I think that symbol second from the bottom indicates some sort of power throughput, and the one above it a modulation frequency. It makes sense that it would need more power throughput to open a raw Rift instead of a Gate, so the difference..."

And with that, they were off to the races, as a room full of geniuses argued and tried to sort out just what it all meant and how they might make use of the Harvest Stone. Assuming they could figure it out well enough to try anything at all...or could agree on anything more complicated than what to have for lunch, for that matter.

Izumi blinked in surprise as the door of her hotel suite opened. A tiny bit of adrenaline spiked through her veins from where she was sprawled on the bed staring at the ceiling. She *knew* Momo wasn't supposed to be back yet. Momo was one of the front-line powerhouses of the team

holding their beachhead into Kurrick. Even with reinforcements pouring in after their initial success, the fact that Momo was effectively *inexhaustible* meant they wouldn't pull her from the action for more than a few hours at a time until she mentally couldn't take the strain any longer.

No one was really happy about that, as it wasn't healthy at all. But Momo was rapidly coming to be regarded as a new All Might, a man who had the reputation of having once gone two straight *weeks* without any rest at all, jumping from crisis to crisis. Give just *how* heavy of a hitter Momo was, just how many powers she had, and just how technically *inexhaustible* she was? They were leaning on her support for as long as they could get away with, healthy or not.

Izumi hated it. Momo hated it. Nedzu hated it. All Might hated it. Yet all of them knew that, for as long as Momo could hold up under the strain, it needed to happen anyway. Honestly, the only upside was that the *frequent* use of One for All had jumped Momo's use up radically. She could now access nearly 90 percent of it, had gained access to more of the Quirks stored within it, *and* had managed to establish semi-reliable contact with the past holders in her mindscape. Enough so, in fact, that she could allow them to 'pilot' her body for brief periods in much the same way 2B and Izumi could switch out. That fact alone was helping shore up Momo's mental stability, but it wouldn't be enough long-term.

More germane at the moment, that meant that Izumi's suite door shouldn't be opening. Using her surge of adrenaline to cut through the mental fog from an exhausting thirty-three hour work session frantically hammering away with the other scientists, Izumi accessed just enough of her hyper cognition to both give herself a throbbing migraine...and hack the hotel security to see who had unlocked her suite before they got a chance to step inside. She instinctively breathed a sigh of relief as she realized it was *Jirou*. Though she doubled checked with her own systems to make sure she wasn't a fake. Last she'd known Jirou was *also* still on the other side of the Gate. When her own sensors confirmed Jirou's biometrics, she dropped hyper cognition and whimpered at the new backlash. She'd used the ability *far* too much in the last day and a half to get an extra edge, and was now suffering the consequences of her still-mortal mind telling her to knock it the fuck off.

There was a haze for a bit, as Izumi embraced mental blankness in an attempt to ignore the pain of the migraine. She wasn't honestly sure how long it lasted, but it must have been at least twenty minutes or so, as she came back to awareness as a freshly-showered Jirou padded into the room wearing nothing but panties and a long t-shirt. Even still in a bit of pain, Izumi could appreciate the sight. Though the frown as Jirou saw her own state marred the view just a little. The punk girl sighed. A sigh almost identical to *Momo Sigh Number 7*. The one that told Izumi her girlfriend was exasperated with Izumi being reckless with her health. Abruptly, Izumi was *slightly* less certain that Jirou and Momo spending time together without her was a great idea. Only slightly, though. It was still the best route to Infinite Jirou Head Pat Acquisition, after all.

"Momo predicted I was going to find you like this, and 2B warned me when I got pulled back from the front, too. Pushed too hard on using that big brain of yours, huh?"

Izumi's answer was more of a whimper than a yes. At least Jirou's voice had been quiet...though her dry, droll, tone had carried worry along with exasperation. Something that would have made Izumi wince, if she wasn't half sure wincing would result in her mind blanking out again.

“Lucky for you, Momo told me what to do about this.”

Jirou padded over to the room’s ensuite, the luxury rooms they were staying in being nice enough they had individual bathrooms. The locals had at least spared no expense in putting all the Heroes and scientists up. Given that the last reports Izumi had seen said virtually all enemy raids on the entire *region* had stopped as the Kurrick Empire focused on crushing the Ziltmach beachhead? Well, it was probably something the locals now considered as having been entirely worth every effort they’d made. Not that Izumi was focused on that, at the moment, her still half-blank mind instead appreciating the view of Jirou’s ass as she turned on the sink, let it heat until the water was literally steaming, and dipped a wash cloth in it.

It was only as Jirou returned to her with said cloth that Izumi’s sluggish mind finally realized what was happening and she smiled gratefully as Jirou laid the cloth over her eyes, the warmth sinking in and ever-so-slightly ameliorating her throbbing migraine. She was a bit surprised, but hardly of a mind to protest, as Jirou continued with an old ritual Momo used when her girlfriend was ‘foolish’ and pushed her hyper cognition to the point that this happened. Momo never failed to lecture her harshly, but she *always* waited until *after* Izumi recovered. Until then, she always did whatever she could to help.

Just as Jirou was doing now, slowly and gently stripping Izumi out of the clothes she’d been too utterly wiped out to remove before falling onto the bed. Izumi let out little whimpers and moans through the process. A moan of pain when Jirou had to move her head to get her shirt off, a moan of near sensual relief as her sizable assets fell free from their support. Izumi might have the improved musculature not to have back pain from large breasts...but if there was a chance she’d have to *fight*, she still needed support for them. And it was bliss to be released from her support-bra.

Jirou slowly stripped Izumi down to nothing but her panties. Momo would have removed those too, but Izumi was idly pleased Jirou had felt comfortable enough to go even this far. She was even *more* pleased when the ritual continued to the next, more intimate stage. Jirou slipped behind her, supporting herself on the bed’s pillows and headboard, and let Izumi lay back on her own body, angled in such a way that her head came to rest on Jirou’s chest. The punk girl didn’t have the massive and delightfully soft pillows Momo did, but she wasn’t flat either. She was a solid high C-cup, and her overall body was less steel-covered-in-thin-velvet than Momo too. She was certainly in great shape, but not the *stupidly* great shape Momo had developed to handle One for All. Even with the lack of Izumi’s absolute favorite *pillows*, the experience was a pleasant one.

One made all the more pleasant moments later as slightly hesitant hands came up and began to work the muscles of Izumi’s neck, shoulders, and head. Despite how much Izumi’s body differed from the standard issue human baseline by this point, the feeling was *still* utter bliss. A cute girl, working on the muscles that were instinctively tensing from the migraine pain, combined with the heat of the cloth over her eyes seeping into still other muscles to loosen their tenseness. Slowly, ever-so-slowly-but-surely, the pain began to fade.

Izumi wasn’t quite sure when the bliss of reality shifted to an even better dream, but she was grateful for both all the same...

Chapter 89: Steps Forward

The morning after Jirou's help with her migraine may actually have been even better than when Momo did the same routine. Izumi had awoken to the heavenly smell of *entirely unhealthy* breakfast foods. The sort she and Momo only got away with eating semi-regularly because both of them had Metabolisms of DOOM™. Oh, most Heroes and Heroines could get away with something like bacon, sausage, and so forth semi-regularly. Fitness had its advantages, and metabolisms that allowed you to cheat a bit more with what you ate from time to time were one of those advantages. That, however, was entirely different from the monstrous Breakfast of Doom™ that had been delivered for Izumi and Jirou.

Rashers of bacon, juicy sausages, and syrupy pancakes, joined by pan con chicharrón, gallo pinto, chocolate croissants, grilled fish, rice, miso soup, and more. Favorite breakfast dishes from several countries around the world, in an amount that seemed to leave Jirou in a bit of awed/disgusted shock. Oh, the punk girl had curiously tried a little bit of everything, but had filled up long before Izumi, whose metabolism was in overdrive trying to make up for her excess power usages of the last few days. Izumi might *technically* be able to get by on nothing but QE. But her body was still very much human enough that it *didn't like doing that*.

That part was normal, though. Well, normal if you knew that this was the usual morning routine for either Izumi *or* Momo when they'd overstressed their Quirks. No, the part that might make it even better than when Momo arranged it all for her? Jirou had yet to lecture her about her excess! It was almost too good to be true! Enough so that Izumi finally, fearfully, asked...only for Jirou to snort in response. Very cute! Must hear again!

"If you'd been working on new support gear for a classmate or something, I'd tear verbal strips off you the same as Momo likely does. Given that you were working on *literally saving the world*, though? Well, I figure that gives you a pass for now. Just don't think I'll let it slide when things are less dire, yeah?"

Izumi untensed, sighing in relief and getting a dry chuckle from Jirou for it. That...made sense. Whew. Wait, now that she was thinking straight again and not worried about being yelled at?

"How are you here, by the way? Away from the front, I mean. I thought you were still on Kurrick?"

Jirou sighed...and brought up one of her jacks slowly. Slowly, Izumi realized, not because she was *trying* to be slow. But because the muscle of the jack was twitching and spasming.

"Quirk exhaustion. After you dropped off my full support gear out of your inventory, I was one of the heaviest hitting mid-range emitters we had. Even with the turrets and those zero-electronics artillery pieces they'd come up with, they keep me moving whenever I wasn't sleeping, plugging holes. The Empire is throwing *everything* at the beachhead. Enough so that no one thinks we can realistically hold it for more than a few days, despite all the reinforcements. One of their elites even managed to leave a mark on Momo, even if it was barely a shallow cut and she got it healed right after."

Izumi's eyes widened. That was...worrying. It meant it had gotten though both Momo's advanced armor *and* the extreme durability that One for All gave its users. In addition to whatever-it-was having been fast enough to *hit her at all*. Momo wasn't All Might, she'd trained too long at a

disadvantage against Izumi's strength to ever get into a slug fest like All Might often did with sufficiently powerful foes. Momo was, like Izumi herself, a high agility fighter. When she was serious, most people short of All Might, Izumi, or a few speedsters out there, couldn't hope to actually make contact with her.

"She's fine, and that elite was easily the strongest thing they've thrown at us. Still, scouts have said they are gathering more elites into a mass concentrated enough that there's little chance we can hold against it. Not without paying too high a price, at least. Orders already came down to pull a fighting retreat once that push happens. The Gate is slowly destabilizing anyway, so best to just make what we can out of it than pull out in good order."

That was...mostly a relief. Part of Izumi still couldn't help but worry. But at least the higher ups weren't intending to force the beachhead to go down fighting to the last man and woman. They easily might have, given how much pressure it was taking off efforts elsewhere. Shaking her head slowly, she chewed on a bit of roshi mashuni before speaking again.

"So, they pulled you out when your Quirk exhaustion got too bad? Are you okay?"

Jirou thankfully nodded.

"Yeah. It's happened before, though not for *years*. I can't get Quirk exhaustion from anything but heavy use of the amplification aspect. It happened now because, well, I was going crazy with the sonic canon at max or near max output for hours at a time. The docs said I should be fine after three or four days rest, and really only my jacks ache a bit. Nothing like the migraine you were suffering through."

Izumi groaned just at the reminder. She *hated* overusing her hyper cognition. Normally, it only happened when she got so in the zone on something that she lost track of how much she was using it. But this time it had been intention and well...it had helped. It had helped a lot. To the point that they might just have some very interesting things to report to high command if the testing the others had been arranging when her backlash had forced her to tap out went well.

Izumi was getting entirely too used to reporting to groups of important people. She didn't like it, and desperately wanted to shove it off on someone else. Unfortunately, due to her heavy-handed use of hyper cognition, she was *technically* the only one who fully understood the new capabilities that they'd managed to gain. She'd argued that others from their team understood *enough* to deal with this presentation. But those others had promptly betrayed her by pointing out that she was the more recognizable figure to the powers that be from various Heroics and military groups that would be attending the briefing.

Also, that they didn't want to do it either. Traitors.

Which is how she found herself in front of the same sort of holo-wall that Mr. Non-descript, who had pointedly never shared his name during the initial briefing before their taskforce had been put together, had used for his own presentation. Both physically present and present as holograms, were a group of high-ranking Heroes and military commanders. Most of whom had been involved with Operation Spear Tip and reaped the benefits of having gambled on the right operation. These

people now had, collectively, the single largest say about the operations of a greatly expanding Task Force Counter and the general war against the Empire of Kurrick.

Bracing herself, leaning *heavily* on her ability to control her own body to an extent not normal for regular humans, Izumi spoke to the group. Behind her, the holowall sprung to life with the display of two images, the Harvest stone as it currently sat in the research lab on the left...and a mostly-stable Gate that *wasn't* made by their enemies on the right.

“As you’re all aware, you’re here to learn what we’ve learned about the Gates, at least in how they might be used to our tactical benefit. First, I will state that our understanding of how the Rifts and Gates are formed has jumped forward immensely. The bad news is that this hasn’t yet led to a better way to *stop* them from forming. The *good news* is that we are now able to create Rifts of our own. Though I caution you that we are still unable to aim them very well.”

She let that sink in for just a moment, before continuing.

“Since we already had a good idea how to stabilize a Rift into a Gate, we were able to do just that on a test Rift. We created a Rift, stabilized it for a short period, and used organic scout Quirks to identify what was on the other side. What we found is both helpful and...not. Specifically, we discovered that we had managed to connect to a world currently controlled by the Kurrick Empire. It is *not*, however, one of the worlds in current rebellion to the Empire. Worse, we were both unable to fully keep the Gate stable...and all other attempts so far have come up with what we’re referring to as ‘blanks.’ Essentially, Rifts that failed to connect to anywhere useful. The rate of that happening, despite our best efforts, is something we suspect is the reason the Kurrick Empire has not invaded more worlds.”

This time, Izumi paused longer, knowing someone would likely speak up with a question. Hoping for it, actually, since frankly that was about all she had to present. It was a major breakthrough...but *using* it was going to be difficult, at best. Thankfully, the individual that spoke up was a familiar and friendly(ish) face. General Utsumi of the JSDF made a very on point observation.

“So, you’re saying that we potentially have a way to open our own Gates into Empire controlled territory, to at least run guerrilla operations. Possibly, given enough time, even to make contact with rebel forces on some of their previously conquered worlds.”

Izumi nodded, thankfully for the friendly lead into discussion.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, General Utsumi. It might be some time before we can figure out how to aim our Rifts precisely, but it at least provides us a promising option to go on the offensive for the first time. Which...might be important given some other abilities we discovered about the system the Empire uses. We may not get a chance for another beachhead operation against an existing Gate, now that they’ve pushed us out of all of those that were invaded by Task Force Counter.”

The Bristol Gate hadn’t been the only one that Counter had arranged to raid through. It had simply been the first and largest. Several lesser invasions of other Gates had been partially responsible for how long the Empire had taken to reclaim the Bristol Beachhead Gate and shut it down. Each of the other invasions had done exactly what they were supposed to do. Distract the enemy from concentrating everything they had on dealing with Operation Spear Tip. Even as Izumi

contemplated that, a slightly more querulous voice spoke up. A NATO General whose name she didn't know.

"More bad news? What do you mean we can't do that again? It worked beautifully to take the pressure off!"

It had. By the time they'd lost their beachhead fully earlier that morning, the number of Rifts opening throughout half of Europe had dropped by almost 43 percent. With the new Rifts within the United Kingdom having dropped off by over 92 percent. Figures that had yet to rise again afterward. So far, at least.

"To put it bluntly, General, tearing off the bandage as it were...we discovered that the control system they use had multiple 'modes.' I don't bring this up to be the bearer of bad news, but to alert you collectively to a nasty possibility that may occur now that they've suffered from the effects of Counter's efforts. Put simply, they are capable of building stable Pocket Realms that can then be launched along a previously mapped path."

Izumi triggered a change in graphic. 2B had done some quick and dirty animation for her, and the holo wall showed a 'bubble' being blown out from a glowing, spherical representation of the world of Ziltmach. Tiny figures loaded up into the bubble, then it released from Ziltmach's 'sphere.' Now free-floating save for a tether to a Rift Tunnel, the bubble flowed down the Rift path until it attached itself to another large bubble marked 'Earth.'

"These pockets of reality, or 'reality bubbles' as we've dubbed them, are not like the Rifts we've seen previously. They require a higher concentration of QE as a target. But they can't be closed in the fashion that the siphons work, either. Once they launch such a bubble and it comes in contact with our reality? We'll have to enter the reality bubble itself and fight our way to a shard of Harvest Stone inside, capturing or destroying it. All while fighting on terrain *they* choose when they formed the bubble. I imagine you can all see the difficulties?"

There was a murmur as all of them, particularly the military men, realized the implications. One strident voice cut over the others. An American who seemed unhappy with the reveal.

"Why the fucking hell haven't they already been doing this then? This doesn't make any sense!"

Izumi didn't take offense. Instead, she snapped her fingers and pointed at him, using her HUD to identify him.

"That is the *right* question, General Armstrong. As far as we can tell? It is *far* more costly to move to the reality-bubble model. Based on our best calculations, they've been running this war against us at a *profit*, at least in total energy expenditure. The Harvest Stones suck QE in through the Rifts themselves *and* the enemy had been attacking civilians to harvest for QE all along. The reality-bubble model would switch that equation up. They'll begin *losing* energy on the invasion, particularly from any Shards of Harvest Stone we gather or destroy. They, essentially, were going with the cheapest, most efficient invasion option first. All while keeping other options in reserve. Life seems to be *very* cheap to them. QE is not. Also, remember, they've done this *seventeen* times

before. I'd personally bet that they developed the second method after someone did exactly what we just pulled off during an early invasion."

There were grimaces of revelation all around. Though one woman from the Heroes side piped up with a question.

"Does that mean that they won't keep invading us, if we make it not cost effective, for long enough?"

Izumi shrugged helplessly.

"I have no idea, Madam Buccaneer. That, I'm afraid, is going to have to be a question answered by the various scout teams or listening posts. At least until such a time as we get lucky enough to connect with a world that has an active rebellion going. They might be able to tell us the answer to that, I suppose? I'm afraid that's well outside my area of expertise."

Quite a few people nodded, and the mood shifted as slowly they began to ask more and more detailed questions. Doing their best to zero in on what Izumi could tell them from the data already gathered...

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