

## BEYOND THE SPIRITS OF AN IRON HEART

S01 E05 - "High Wire"

*GZ in the warzone.*

The sky on this planet was red, as if it was dyed in blood. But the battlefield will never be dyed vermilion again. Operation 434 had been a fierce one, for the Iron Soldier hadn't shed any blood, and his platoon had been stranded in the trenches for another sixty-three hours, with GZ's company unable to take a single hill. GZ's AI gave him a 27% chance of survival. A fierce battle was raging on all sides, and the transmissions calling for support from GZ were in, but now he had his hands full returning fire to the enemy in front of him. The constant barrage of enemy bullets caused a new recruit named JJ to panic.

"Captain! How do I... instruct..."

"Calm down! I demand assistance! Now!" He opened the channel. A series of voices that didn't belong to anyone he knew popped in and out of the comm circuit.

"KB, turn to the left and cover LJ!"

"This is the 4th Platoon DZ!"

He bent down and shouted at the burst of close-in ammunition, "This is the 7th Platoon, we're currently isolated at point twenty-three! Somebody give me some backup!"

A whirlwind of rage flooded the receiver. "I don't have time for this! I'll help you—"

The platoon leader's response vanished! In the hellscape, GZ continued to scream commands. "If we can get through here, we can stop the enemy's main force, just give us five minutes, or even three minutes, to silence the enemy on the right wing!" After what felt like an eternity, he heard a raspy voice interfered with by the shockwave.

"Copy that. This is the third platoon. I'll cover you."

GZ's AI saw hope. The 3rd Platoon was a brave and courageous unit, and its red commander's fighting spirit was well known to the other companies. The odds of success were high. A barrage of bullets was put up on the right flank, the rain of bullets weakened, and without the slightest pause, GZ ordered the assault. Those few minutes of fierce fighting were the deciding factor. The hill had fallen, and the long battle was over.

GZ sent a thank you to the third platoon in relief, but all they received was noise. Probably, in order to make the operation a success, he was prepared to shield himself from total destruction. Eventually a search team to check on the red wreckage, GZ closed his eyes and muttered. "Thank you for that. I would've taken this place if it weren't for you guys..." But as his men were on the hill, celebrating, a command from headquarters popped into the open communications circuit.

"What?!"

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GZ couldn't believe his ears at the content, but there was no mistaking the repeated orders.

After a moment's hesitation, he told his men: "Retreat... the main unit will fall back ten kilometers."

The celebratory mood of his men froze for a moment, and GZ wouldn't make a mistake in telling a joke. There was the weight of lead in that one word. "You heard me. 'Down the hill.'"

JJ muttered in dismay. "It can't be... we're going to die!" And he didn't move from that spot. His fists shook.

"It took me three days to get it! A lot of guys are down! And yet, as soon as I finally got it, it was worth nothing..."

"That's right, but that's war!" GZ yelled, struck by an indignation he couldn't even explain to himself. It was a sense of emptiness that occurred after a battle. The frustration that doesn't show up in numbers; emotions were only obstacles.

"We are Iron Soldiers."

The orders were absolute. As the wounded soldiers descended the hill, GZ stood at the top and looked out over the still smoldering remains of the fierce battle. The earth was filled with countless wreckage. He could no longer tell which of them were his allies. The sky was red as if it had been stained with blood. There was no change in the sensor readings, but the red in the sky was certainly darker in his eyes than before. The red blood of humans would no longer flow. It was they who would fight, and none of them knew these words left behind by the engineers who had created the Iron Soldier so long ago.