

BEYOND THE SPIRITS OF AN IRON HEART

S02 E03 - "Voyage of Home"

GZ and Fighter Arrow's exhausting tournament.

GZ's blade shallowly gouged the ice and turned. The puck was controlled by its stick. A booster on his back erupted and a blue bolt of lightning raced down the rink's left side. With a single arm, GZ brushed away an enemy defender who came crashing down on his side, and GZ got into a shooting stance and swung his stick up.

"I'm going to need some help from GZ." When Fighter Arrow suddenly visited Silver Castle, he suddenly made a request, which made everyone who greeted him look at him in awe.

"What's the matter, brother? Stick caught?"

"I'm running out of time. He's the only one who can save my team." The two being brothers, Magnum came to a conclusion without saying a word.

After the World Tour, Fighter Arrow returned to his old hockey team, Dark Emperor, from his days at Silver Gallant. His performance earned the team a place in the Avonley Cup, the world's premier iron hockey competition.

The Avonley Cup. It's a big title that all hockey leaguers are said to be aiming for the glory that comes with the name. Fighter Arrow wanted to bolster their squad, so they gave GZ the green light.

"I want to trade GZ in for Dark Emperor." Arrow's offer was enough to stun everyone. Ruri was beside herself.

"No... you can't! Absolutely not! GZ is a greatly important player!"

Fighter Arrow had asked GZ directly. That was even more aggravating for Ruri. GZ asked Edmund Ginjo beside him. "What is a rental transfer?"

"Well, it's like going to a helper at a deadline."

"You're not fired, are you—" There was relief somewhere in his voice.

Ruri couldn't contain her resentment. "We have an all-star soccer game coming up!"

"The date is after the final round of the Avonley Cup. No problem, though." Edmond said, as if he were someone else.

"Uncle!"

Edmond let Ruri's "Whose side are you on?" cut him off.

"As a hockey leaguer, I was wanted on the world's greatest stage, so why don't we let GZ make the decision for himself?"

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Lurie swallowed his words as if confused by the words and looked at GZ. Yes, he's a hockey leaguer...

The person in question was taking this matter in a Soldier-style thought routine. During his time as a Soldier, he had been a mercenary and traveled all over the battlefield as a mercenary. He had no aversion to fighting for hire. Only a good warrior could pass through many battles and be praised as a strong man of the past. It's an honor to be recognized for your abilities, but that didn't mean he was going to quit Silver Castle.

"If you need my help, I'm happy to help." Thus, GZ's participation in the Avonley Cup was decided.

"Well, listen, if GZ does well, it's good publicity for Silver Castle. Plus, there's a rental fee coming in."

Ruri, who tried to convince himself that she was going to be sent off to a carefree part-time job, nearly stroked out at the high rental fee in her account and realized the weight of honor that the Avonley Cup held.

"The best at hockey in the world..."

Ruri felt like she had seen a side of GZ that she didn't know about.

The group of leaguers caught the public eye at the airport. Magnum and the rest of the Silver Castle team saw GZ and Arrow off on their way to the Avonley Cup.

"It's your sport, you're going to come far." Bull Armor tapped him on the shoulder.

"Let them see your silver spirit," Windy winked with his usual thumbs-up.

Ruri advanced into the circle of mouthfuls of encouragement. "GZ..."

"What's wrong, owner?"

The usually-bright face looked down. Ruri tried to encourage GZ to take on the world stage in her own way, but it's not something you should be used to doing. She couldn't think of anything. GZ waited for words. So did Magnum and the others. The silent pause was a pressure.

"Uhm... well, so..." Ruri was trapped under the weight of expectation. "T-the ice is slippery, so be careful!"

Everyone in the room was at a loss for a reaction to such blatant words.

"Ruri..." Edmond sighed.

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"Oh... well... I mean..." As she desperately searched for words, GZ's expression lifted as he understood Ruri's concern for him.

"I understand, owner. I'll go for it, though, fair and square."

Ruri looked up, and GZ turned to her, reflecting the thumbs-up signs that his friends were exchanging. "Alright!" Ruri returned to her usual smile and nodded. The boarding announcement prompted Arrow and GZ.

"I'll be watching TV. We'll be cheering you on!"

GZ nodded with a content sigh. As he nodded to Lurie and the others and walked through the gate, GZ felt a faint unease that he had never felt before.

The Avonleigh Cup is played in seven rounds. The other male winner this season is Blue Horse. Yes, they are the same team that fought with Silver Castle on the World Tour, but Thunderbolt was not there. *Why isn't he out?* GZ wondered. The Thunderbolts are supposed to be an indispensable asset to the team as an immovable center forward.

"I don't know. I don't know, we've had a lot of new players come in this season," GZ said. Arrow had no way of knowing the other team's situation, either.

"Well..."

"It's a shame you couldn't fight your rivals."

"My mission is to win with Dark Emperor." GZ said with a soldier's face.

Finally, the battle for the best in Iron Hockey is over.

The combination of GZ and Arrow was outstanding, as if they had been working together for years. It was the result of a high-level fusion of skills between top players, but there was also confusion. When the Blue Horse leaguers would come at you to get the puck, they would come at you with attacks that were sure to damage your joint gears. On the surface, it looked like a clean fight, but it was clearly rough play.

Ice hockey is a game where contact play was allowed under the original rules: "On the ice, it's a martial art." Its most distinctive feature is its offense and defense, but the goal is not to hurt the opponent. It was not an acceptable act now that the Iron League has woken up to fair play. Nevertheless, with the outstanding performance of GZ and Fighter Arrow, Dark Emperor won the first game, and then used the aftermath to take the second and third rounds to quickly take the crown, but the damage to the players was deep.

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GZ contacted Silver Castle before the fourth round. When Ruri answered, she was pleased with his performance. "That's great, with the momentum we've got, we're going to win!"

At the look on her face, GZ said huskily, "Owner can't you all come over here?"

"Well... I'd love to go, but we've got an all-star to get ready for..."

"I see..."

"Good luck, we're all rooting for you..."

GZ again felt that anxiety that he couldn't explain. There was no way to explain it away to his AI, which had no concept of loneliness.

"What's wrong with you, GZ...?"

They didn't know that they had fallen into the trap of a clever rough play, but they weren't fazed by it. The doomed final game had begun. Repeatedly vicious attacks, GZ couldn't hold back and yelled.

"Stop! This is how you're going to play for the best in the world?!"

But the Blue Horse players were eerily blank and didn't respond.

"They're the Iron Leaguers...?" GZ murmured to Arrow back at the pit.

"At least on the outside," Arrow replied.

"But the way they fight is like..." GZ had a bad feeling about it.

"Oh, something has changed in Blue Horse." Arrow felt it too.

"So you're saying..." GZ felt a hot tingle smolder deep in his circuits. It was no longer a mission. He hadn't realized it himself, but his hockey-league mindset was beginning to resurface. The game was back and forth, with the final period tied at one goal.

There weren't many Dark Emperor players who could move; GZ and Fighter Arrow were fighting at full strength, standing at the rink with their bodies on the verge of overheating. But now, besides them, there was no one else who could counter the Blue Horse's rough play.

"Time is running out, the next goal will decide the game. Don't give them a chance to fight back." Arrow dashed off, dribbling the puck.

"Alright!" GZ nodded and followed.

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If he attacked without pause, the enemy would not be able to bypass him for fear of being scored on. The attack was the biggest defense. A pass between Arrow and GZ teased the enemy's defense and opened up a brief path to the goal. Quickly, Arrow fired in a shot, but the keeper caught it just in time.

"Damn it!" GZ goes to pick up the rebound. The enemy didn't miss that moment of separation of formations. As soon as he took the puck, he was in the pincer. The enemy's stick bit into him, burning the circuitry in his body and cutting off his memory.

The next thing I knew, GZ was in the pit. The Fighter Arrow had pushed him into the pit road, unable to move. Tethered to the maintenance auxiliary equipment and oil tubes, GZ had no choice but to wait.

As soon as they saw that one of the pillars was gone, Blue Horse took to the bulk of the team and attacked Dark Emperor. One by one, one by one, the Leaguers went down on the ice. Among them, only Fighter Arrow remained in control of the puck. If it was taken away, there was no power left to fight back. Forced to stop in the pit, GZ was frustrated that he couldn't do anything to help the lone Arrow. The maintenance continued. The clock chipped away at the time mercilessly.

Arrow was under the concentrated attack of Blue Horse. He was now the only one who could move. He was desperately trying to duck and secure his puck, but he was outnumbered. Finally, Arrow couldn't take it anymore and collapsed. The puck slid away from the stick and rolled over.

At that moment, a tingle of circuitry became a clear intent that galvanized GZ. He tore off the maintenance cord and ran out to the rink. "I can't lose to guys like you!" GZ caught the puck and slashed into it with lightning speed.

All of Blue Horse surged forward, this time coming to crush GZ. The first stick swung down, aiming for his leg. He jumped wayward and the second one went for a slap on the arm. He stepped out and struck out, but in the blink of an eye, a third elbow strike hit him in the face. He couldn't avoid it. He took a hard hit and fell, and the puck slid into the no man's land in the air.

"GZ!" That's when he heard Ruri scream. Ruri was indeed in the bleachers looking down at the fallen GZ. Behind him, in the leg hold seats, were Magnum and the others. They had come—Silver Castle.

GZ was up and running. The puck was still free. Chance was alive. The fourth enemy defender was heading for the puck, and GZ made a frantic dash for it with a bellow. Taking the puck a split second early, GZ turned and rushed to the enemy lines with his acceleration booster in full force. As he brushed away the fifth defender with one arm,

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there was only the keeper standing in goal in front of him. The hockey leaguer's instincts screamed, *go for it now!*

That will was the only thing that controlled GZ. GZ struck the puck with all the strength he could muster.

"Blizzard Slapshot!"

The puck flew with tremendous energy, melting the flying ice grains and turning them into mist. The swirling white shockwave pressured the keeper and exploded, slamming his entire body into the goal.

Fighter Arrow was propped up on his shoulders by GZ and watched the stadium gush with excitement. "Thank you, GZ..."

"No need to thank me. I'm a hockey leaguer myself. The honor is irreplaceable." The two exchanged a smile.

"Are you going to stay in the Dark Emperor as a hockey leaguer?" Arrow inquired.

But GZ shook his head. "My mission is over. This is the last time I'll be fighting for hire. I have a place to go..." GZ looked at the audience. Now Ruri and her friends had just jumped down to the rink.

"GZ!" Ruri, who had come at first sight, was tripped up by the ice.

GZ took her gently and said. "Owner, the ice is slippery. Be careful." He looked up at Ruri's smile. And then there were the smiles of his friends. In the midst of it all, GZ also smiled sincerely. He had made it back home.

To be continued...