

BEYOND THE SPIRITS OF AN IRON HEART

S02 E04 - "Wandering Spirit"

Maybe it's a one-night-only dream. The glittering stars scattered in the constellation of the Iron League will gather together and release a dazzling radiance. It was a dream ball game, the night of the All-Star Game. The crowd in the middle of the stadium was packed with people who had been waiting for this moment.

"It truly is an all star game..."

Ruri looked around the stadium in excitement from the owner's box seat with great emotion. A year ago, it was not just a dream ball game, but a dream to win one. Edmond and Meckel next to her must have felt the same way, their faces were happy. The ceremony for player introductions began in the main lights, and the members of the Silver Castle appeared on the field one by one. Suddenly, a voice came from behind Ruri.

"Go, Magnum!"

"Windy!"

She looked back in surprise and saw Hiroshi and the others right under her nose. "Ah! Where did you guys come from?!"

They laughed softly. Hiroshi scratched his head.

"This is a seat for team officials."

"I told them I was the owner's brother and they let me in."

Bezbez launched himself from the side.

"Oh, come on. Everywhere is full, there's nowhere to look." Hiroshi clasped his hands together. The children's pleading faces surrounded him.

"Ah, well, I guess it can't be helped."

Ruri nodded as if she'd given up.

"Thank you, sister Ruri!"

As soon as the forgiveness was granted, Hiroshi and the others took up their positions in the front row and gave a shout-out to the field.

"Good luck, Silver Castle!"

"No, guys," Ruri said.

"Today, you see, it's not just Silver Castle. We're cheering for the three Gold brothers too."

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"Really?" Bezbez's eyelids fluttered in confusion.

If you divide the teams in the district by east and west, Silver Castle and Dark Prince would be the west. This time, the fan voting in the west focused on these two teams. As a result, the west was composed of seven of Silver Castle's mainstays, including Magnum Ace, Silky, and the three Gold Brothers. Normally, their rivals would flare up, but tonight, they were aiming for the same goal.

"It's funny, playing soccer with your team." Gold Arm chuckled at Magnum Ace.

"I've always believed there would come a time like this. The day when all the Leaguers would compete with each other to the best of their ability." Magnum looked around the field. The fighting spirit of a true sportsman abounded from everyone, but none of them could have known that one of them had become seriously troubled.

The swirl of cheers that gushed forth made Bull Armor over-conscious in denial. There's a guy in this huge crowd, too. So many people were staring...

"Here goes, Bull Armor!"

He was brought back to himself by Magnum's cry. Instantly, he saw a ground-crawling shot coming at him. He braced himself and caught it, but he couldn't resist the inertia, and the ball spilled out of his hands. Bull Armor gulped and followed the ball with his eyes as it rolled into the goal with force.

There is an insurmountable time lag between consciousness and actual work. His vision and thoughts are definitely catching the ball, but he instantly knew that he couldn't reach out in time. It was a second of despair that seemed like an eternity. But Magnum, who had slipped in, cleared it just before the line and freed Bull from his trance. He patted his chest in relief and turned around.

"Thanks for the help, Magnum..."

"What's troubling you, making a mistake like that?" Magnum's eyes stared inquisitively.

"I'm sorry..." He couldn't explain why.

Magnum didn't try to push further and went back to the front. Windy looked at the goal.

"What happened to that guy...?"

"There's something wrong!" Gold Foot said sharply.

"Aww, come on, Bull Armor!" Ruri involuntarily lowered herself into the seat.

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The children seem worried. "Bull Armor, what's wrong with you?"

"There's something wrong..." Ruri looked at Meckel and heard a voice with a hint of resentment. "The maintenance before the match was perfect. There's nothing wrong with that. But..."

"Hmm... maybe it's something else," Edmond muttered.

The sight of GZ playing like a fish out of water in the Avonley Cup had awakened the unfinished business that Bull had been putting away. Standing again in a football league purged of the fighting bull stigma... it was dreamlike. It was three days ago that this became a serious concern. As he left the practice field alone for the last time, Bull Armor was stopped by a voice that he had missed. It was the Jet Setter. His one request shook Bull to his core..

"Will you come to my team?"

Bull had heard that he had gathered a group of stray league volunteers to form a football team, but he hadn't expected an invitation to come to him. Jet Setter said the team would soon be tested for the local league registration. If they registered, they could play against teams. If he could make it that way, he might be able to move up to the Central League one day.

But the team didn't have a quarterback in a commanding position. He was the keystone of the team, deciding on a plan at a moment's notice, supporting formations and switching offensive patterns at times in a flexible manner. They needed someone with experience. Only Bull Armor could be that. Jet Setter had come to that decision.

"Remember the final quarter of the Iron Super Bowl - the game-winning comeback touchdown pass with two seconds left on the clock? The excitement of that moment belongs to us football leaguers."

A hot heartbeat came back to Bull's entire body.

"I won't forget the feel of the ball or the thrill of the moment..."

He'd like to surrender to that excitement again, but it was too heavy a choice for him to make a decision.

His thoughts were interrupted by the looming feeling. As expected of an all-star, the opponents were all top-notch. They were dodging through the defensive line of Ryuuken and Juurouta, fleshing out the goal area and shooting. The ball came roaring in just short of the crossbar. The momentary delay caused Bull to misjudge the course of the shot and delay his reaction.

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It was Silver Castle's forward, Gold Foot, who dove in front of Bull, to Bull Armor's surprise. He cleared the ball with his head.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, asshole?!" Gold Foot sneered.

Magnum gave a concerned look to Bull, who was being scolded by Foot. When it came to the goal kick, Bull Armor checked his side's position. It was far away, but Mach Windy was free on the right side. This pass would go through, Bull was instantly convinced, and he was unconsciously in a position to throw the ball. It was a football quarterback move. Far from the instincts that governed the series of moves, he could see Jet Setter running down the field.

His old friend stood there in the twilight.

"Let me hear your answer."

"Hold on, Jet Setter—it's not that easy..."

"You've gotten over your imperfect AI. You're not supposed to have any more nightmares."

"But..."

It wasn't a question with a quick answer.

"You're the one who brought back my Iron Leaguer spirit! Throw a pass to me again!" Jet Setter's enthusiasm was causing Bull's mind to wander. The temptation to see what he could do as a football leaguer once more rose strongly in his head, but the need to swing away was pushed back each time he tried to shake it off. He felt like something important was pulling at his heart's sleeve, but he had no idea what it was.

The opponent was jumping in front of him when he heard a scream-like cheer. If only he had been calm for just half a second, he would have known it was a decoy. But Bull, who rushed out from the goal, could not see his surroundings. Gold Foot, feeling uneasy, was running into the defense from the front.

Bull failed to grab the ball as it went over his head and made contact with Foot, impeding his movement. The ball fell to the opposite flank and was easily stolen by the waiting striker. Bull, with his shoulder down, was disappointed with himself for being distracted.

After the restart kicked off, the West's rhythm remained in disarray. The defensive line was downwardly concerned about the goal. They were reluctant.

"This isn't going to score us any points," Gold Arm spat.

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It was the lone forward who felt it the most. He was sealed off by a fierce mark, preventing him from attacking.

"Damn it, I'm out of patience!" Gold Foot snapped, suddenly snatching the ball from Windy.

"Gold Foot?" Windy looked away, stunned.

"It's pathetic, to think that we've had our shots stopped by those bastards all this time!" Gold Foot turned and dribbled in with the precision of a well-aimed arrow.

As Magnum and Windy tried to chase after Gold Foot, Arm and Mask stood in their way.

"I won't let you get in the way..." Gold Arm stared him down.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Windy shouted.

"You are the ones who don't know how my brothers feel!" Gold Mask looked at Magnum and the others.

Magnum looked into Gold Arm's eyes. There was the glow of one who had come to clash souls with each other so many times. It was a light that believed in its rival. A conversation of intentions, more certain than words, was exchanged. Gold Arm and Mask went after Foot, with Magnum and the others holding their ground behind them.

"Damn it. Top Joy, GZ, let them..."

"Wait!"

Magnum won over Windy, who was about to run. "If it wasn't for them we wouldn't be able to call back the real Bull Armor"

"What the hell are you doing?"

The three Gold brothers sprinted toward a baffled Bull Armor. "I'm going to wake him up!" Gold Foot jumped. Then Gold Arm, followed by Mask, created a tornado before the goal.

"You think you're going to be able to focus on your friends' attacks when you're like that?!" Foot shouts.

"We're Iron Leaguers! What's the point of fighting if you're not giving it your all?!" Arm yelled.

"Once you're on the field, give it your all!" Mask shouted.

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"I'm..." Bull remembered something.

"You weren't the one who came to defend Silver Castle's goal!" Gold Foot added, ascending to the top of the tornado. The thoughts that had been sinking into Bull Armor surfaced.

"We're here to fight our glorious rivals, to feel our oil boil!"

Bull Armor was trying to find his answer to Jet Setter, still. He steadily realized that it was time to fight. The goalie stared in awe at the spinning vortex. Power boiled out of its depths.

"Tornado Final Shoot!" The ball tore through the tornado and flew out.

One angry shot, Bull revived and stopped the ball with a roar. The tornado lifted and the three brothers descended.

"That's it, we can leave the goal in good hands!" Arm smiled with satisfaction and nodded at his brothers and Magnum.

Windy rushed over. "You had me worried..."

"It's all right. Now it's your turn to hit that goal over there." Bull kicked the ball back high.

"Alright, here we go, Gold Foot!"

"Okay, Windy!" The duo rushed out again like wolves hunting for their goal.

The festivities were over, and when the stars had returned to their original constellation, a figure walked up to the one remaining shadow in the central stadium league seats.

"Jet Setter, right?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm the coach of Silver Castle."

Edmond appeared and stood beside Jet Setter, looking down at the now uninhabited field. "Did you see Bull Armor?"

"I did..." Jet Setter nodded.

"That was pretty good, wasn't it?"

"It was..."

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He was puzzled by the unexpected question, and Edmond looked up and laughed. "I'm sure he sees the right path to take. Don't rush him." Edmond patted Jet Setter's chest and urged him to look to one side as he left. When he looked, he saw Bull with the moon behind him.

"I'm here to give you..." Bull hesitated. "My answer..."

The oval ball arced and was passed to Jet Setter. It was the ball he had given to Bull Armor earlier when they had met again in the wilderness arena. The part that had been torn then had been repaired.

As if to remind himself, Bull Armor said. "I can't leave this place just yet..."

Jet Setter stared at the ball, smiling. He nodded silently.

As the All-Star telecast ended, a dignified voice echoed in the old locker room.

"Alright, let's go, Amp!"

"Let's do it!" Watt and Amp grabbed their gloves and headed for the dugout.

A dry wind blew through them as they walked past the benches and out onto the ground. The clouds were hanging low. The stands, where the sparse crowd clutched their betting bills in their hands, were filled with the bleakness unique to the local league. Tensions ran through the sisters as they stepped onto the unknown field. Today was the girls' debut game.

"It's the Iron Bowler sisters! You can't get a baseball strike by rolling a ball!"

As the fielders flew from the back netting, chilling wins and whistles propagated throughout the stadium. Most of the guests would be betting on the other team. "Ignore them. Throw with all you've got!" Amp focused with determination.

"Alright! This is the path we've chosen!" Watt tightened her lips and took a step toward the mound. At the same time, in a room in a huge building overlooking the ocean, a tall man turned off the monitor for the All-Star telecast. In the dimmed office, his sharp, glasses-covered eyes watched the moonlight reflect off the ocean's surface through the window.

"Silver Castle..." The scheme was beginning to take form.

To be continued...