

[Juron arc] [6] [Stormchaser] [9649]

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Garrik's private cruiser was roaming above a majestic fleet of 17,000 ships near New Earth. As Juron's primary sponsor, Garrik had much at stake.

"This is an awesome view," Garrik remarked on his bridge. Juron was standing next to him.

"Indeed, sir. We cannot lose," Juron responded indifferently.

Garrik had invested most of his personal wealth into building this fleet. He was in dire search for glory and Juron provided him a good platform to pursue one. As Morrik's son, he desperately wished to surpass his father's fame.

Gen. Morrik used to serve under Acshell the liberator. He planned to retire when Acshell the liberator retired. However, with his sudden disappearance and Richard Bau's subsequent rule revived his career as one of top generals under Andromeda union. His position was eventually succeeded by his son, Garrik, who had no first-hand battle experience until the second Sol-Andromeda invasion.

Once he tasted showering praises and increasing fame from the public and council, he had sort of become addicted to it and desired to have Juron by his side as his advisor.

Juron obliged but for his own agenda instead of Garrik's.

"General Wong's fleet of 5,000 will join in due time. With it, we have the weapon large enough to finally destroy United Sol," Juron explained and defended his previous two invasions, "It is now possible because I've weakened them."

Although highly praised at first, Juron's first two invasions were starting to be seen and debated as waste of national resources. Experts argued that it was unnecessary for him to trigger the two invasions when he could have simply destroyed United Sol in one full sweep. Juron's refusal for interviews was also seen as being arrogant.

"I can hardly wait. My father will be very proud."

"Whatever," Juron thought.

He truly couldn't care less. The only thing that truly mattered to him was destruction of United Sol. He wasn't even after the fame that'd come along with the achievement.

"I will be heading to Freedom colony soon, sir," Juron said to Garrik who was captured by the view of his fleet on screen. "While I am away, I'd like you to make sure that the fleet is kept on standby."

"No need to worry, Juron. We've got this."

After the two invasions, Juron had to accept that he could no longer just ignore Freedom colony. His second invasion had come to an awkward end because of them. Therefore, he decided to open a negotiation with them to secure a safe pass as well as backing in the war.

Freedom colony representatives, Reed and Ashuta, were present when Juron arrived at a private cruiser that was selected as a neutral venue.

"Hey, Jackass," Reed bluntly called out when Juron entered a conference room.

Not too amused or even offended, Juron warned kindly, "I suggest you watch your mouth for your own good."

Not being pushed back, Reed ridiculed, "Right..., I hear you dig younger guys now."

He was referring to Juron's history of working under General Wong and then moving onto Garrik.

Still not biting the bait, Juron calmly responded, "Let's get on with the talk, shall we?"

"Do you think we want this talk of yours?" Reed talked back. He clearly sounded as if he wanted none of it.

"Oh? Is it over already then?"

"Indeed, let's get out of here."

Just like that, Reed and Ashuta walked away from the talk. It was something completely unexpected by Juron. He figured Reed was playing along but expected the talk to continue regardless.

In fact, it wasn't just Freedom colony that was acting wayward against Juron.

Everyone around him was, in a way or another, starting to act against him with an exception of Garrick. It was primarily due to a fact that Juron was an extremely self-centered person who didn't care for anyone else but himself. Loyalty meant nothing to him and he was fine using people as tools. While he never spoke aloud about his selfishness, his actions spoke loudly how selfish he was.

In the end, no one was really willing to work for him. And, if they did, they did it with half a heart.

Juron was unable to comprehend the situation. He saw what Cecil had done and yet he did fine. Why couldn't him? Cecil murdered millions and, even to this day, he had a group of loyal supporters. Why couldn't him?

In a sense, Juron was mimicking Cecil's methods. His "My way or the high way" attitude was what got him this far. Of course, he understood that he couldn't exactly copy his methods.

Cecil's methods worked because he had the absolute upper hand. It was either his way or death. Juron's methods were similar in concept. It was all possible because of his rank as a class S ESP. He could snap people's necks at whim. Regardless how powerful he was however, he still needed to work with others. And, having run out of ways as well as absolutely needing cooperation of Freedom colony for the 3rd invasion, he turned to a very unlikely person for assistance.

When Wemer arrived at the Knights HQ after being informed that Juron was there, he found Juron and Sevn exchanging silent glares in the lobby and there was no one else in the immediate vicinity as if fearing their clash.

"Juron!" Wemer called out to break the mood. "This is new. The last time you visited here was decades ago."

Juron and Sevn finally broke off the confrontation as Juron turned around to face Wemer. He quickly led Juron to his office.

Once in the office and sat down, Wemer began.

"What brings you here, Mr. Councilor?"

"I've come to ask you a favor."

Wemer doubted what he had just been told. "I beg your pardon? Sorry, I had some drinks last night."

Ignoring the sarcasm, Juron repeated stoically, "I've come to ask you a favor."

Having been ensured that what he had been just told was no fluke, he replied calmly,

"Okay..., Juron, I will be frank. Personally, I don't want to help you and I believe you know why. Additionally, I believe the reason you came to see me is that you have no one else to turn to. Is that right?"

For Juron, it was painful to admit but he did.

"Yes."

Crossing fingers, Wemer asked carefully. "Do you know why it has come to this?"

"I did not come here for counseling, Wemer," Juron warned.

"True, but I am not the one who needs something here. You are."

Juron grunted silently. Indeed, it was Wemer who held cards at the moment. "I suppose I've been too ruthless."

"You suppose? You have been, sir. I still have not forgotten the moment we had a fight with you during the Milky way tragedy where you ended up murdering Lord Ankle. I also have not forgotten how you threw me a bone to look into the Emperor's well-being. Not only were you ruthless, you have also been manipulative in bad ways. You cannot keep using people like that and expect support from others."

Juron endured Wemer's lecture because it was true that he had no one else to turn to. "Do you expect an apology from me?" He inquired indifferently.

Sighing, Wemer shook his head weakly. "Normally, I would. But I see that you couldn't care less."

True.

Wemer continued, "I know what kind of childhood you endured. Still, I don't know how-"

"Stop." Juron fired a warning glare at Wemer. "Bring my childhood once more, I will simply cut you down."

Wemer was aware of Juron's childhood. After all, he had conducted an extensive background research on him when he became a Knight.

Juron hailed from a broken middle class family. His parents were constantly fighting and his mother eventually passed away due to stress and then Juron eventually ended up murdering his own father. While his childhood was certainly not ideal, it wasn't the worst, either.

Regardless, his childhood appeared to be painful memories for him clearly. Therefore, Wemer decided not to agitate him further. Additionally, seeing Juron wasn't really going to apologize and alter his ways, he became clearly reluctant to assist him. On the other hand, what Juron was attempting to do was for the sake of the nation, on surface at least.

In the end, Wemer agreed to assist him and talk to the Freedom colony on his behalf.

"You owe me one," Wemer reminded Juron who was leaving his office. He left the office without replying him.

It was easy for Wemer to set up a meeting with Reed and Ashuta. After all, Wemer had a solid reputation under his belt. He was a hard working and uncorrupted member of Andromeda union.

Wemer arrived at the same neutral venue and was welcomed warmly by Reed.

Wemer wasn't alone of course. He had brought Juun with him.

"Mr. Wemer, it is good to see you," Reed said, "May I assume that you've come here on behalf of Juron?"

Wemer nodded firmly. "Aye, now I understand why you walked out on him and I do not blame you."

Reed smiled. "Indeed, sir, considering what he has pulled, we aren't going to deal with him. I'd rather go to a war against him."

Those were strong words and Wemer grew slight doubt over a potential deal.

"Understandable. Well, this isn't about him. I've come to discuss a deal with Freedom colony over support. As you know, we are preparing a war against United Sol. We will be crossing your zone and we'd like your support in this."

In other words, Wemer wanted assurance that Freedom colony wouldn't attack them from behind, like the last time. Furthermore, Wemer cleverly left Juron out of the picture.

For Reed, despite of playing hardball, he was fully aware of little choices he had. If Freedom colony would reject, it was obvious that Andromeda union would target them first. The colony wouldn't fall easily but it would fall, he knew. If United Sol was strong enough, the colony could ask for an aid but, with United Sol in tatters, Freedom colony stood virtually alone. Of course, there was the Nebula pirates, but Lila was adamant that they couldn't use the pirates for the second time. Rather, in truth, Lila was fearful of using Sae too many times.

All things considered, all Reed could do was play hardball but eventually accept Wemer's demand. Or at least, that was what everyone thought.

"Very well, I suppose we don't have a choice," Reed said with a stiff smile on his face at which point Wemer had a confident grin. However, Reed continued. "However, under one condition."

Wemer narrowed his eyes and carefully inquired, "What is it?"

"As a gesture of good will, we want to be able to construct an outpost in the asteroid belt," Reed proposed.

There was a vast asteroid belt on edge of Andromeda system near New Earth. Red plate shipyard was based on that asteroid belt. The zone was rich with minerals and had been the prime source of metals. Reed's proposal was daring and was even

outside of Wemer's authority. He'd need a council's permission to grant such a request.

Quickly realizing that the matter was becoming complicated, Wemer let out of a sigh and answered, "You do realize that what you are asking is outside of my powers."

"I do." Reed promptly replied with a crooked grin. "But you could make it work without involving your council."

Shaking head, Wemer rejected the notion. "No, no, I am not hearing it."

"Do you think your stubborn council would even listen to this request then?"

They would certainly not, Wemer was absolutely sure about that.

"What are you proposing? Let's hear it first," Wemer dared asking.

Reed's idea was that the Knights could build an asteroid base and then let Freedom colony use it. On surface, the Knights would be in charge.

"Absolutely not!" Wemer raised his voice at once in rejection.

Reed made a stoic face and concluded. "The talk is over then."

"You are risking a war!"

"So be it."

Wemer frowned, hard, and an uneasy silence sat still between the two parties for a while. Having felt that Reed wasn't here to negotiate to begin with, he decided to walk out of the talk which Reed didn't stop.

And the talk broke down just like that.

"They really are risking a war," Wemer remarked on a bridge of a cruiser during their return journey. He grumbled and shook his head in the captain's chair.

"I suppose it was worse with Juron in charge," Juun remarked who was casually watching a screen displaying some sort of video behind a console.

Shrugging, Wemer's mutter continued. "They didn't seem they wanted to strike any sort of deals. If I didn't know any better, I would have said they were there to play."

"Will there be really a war though?"

Wemer paused for a moment before answering him. "There may. I suppose it is up to Juron now."

Juron wasn't visibly surprised to be informed that the negotiation broke down. In fact, he was eagerly waiting for it. He did not wait a day once he was informed of the result and made a full speech during a council session that Freedom colony was an obstacle that needed to be gotten rid of.

He had a point. However, his opposition wasn't going to let him have his way.

They argued that Freedom colony was acting wayward only because Juron was pushing them too hard into making a choice. They pointed out that the colony had always been a neutral entity and would remain so.

Juron talked back, stating a fact that Freedom colony did push the second invasion off the track and pushed the idea that the colony was taking a side.

Both sides had valid points. However, whoever was more persuasive wasn't the point. With more and more people standing against Juron since the second invasion, he simply could not get enough votes to push on with his agenda.

With his agenda turned down by lack of votes, Juron had no legally clear way to deal with Freedom colony. This was when Garrik made a surprising proposal.

"If bureaucracy gets in one's way, you use might to override," He boldly stated. "I say we just push on with your plan. We can deal with them later. Acshell the liberator never had to deal with bureaucracy."

It was certainly an option. Garrick was one of the most powerful general in the Union. If he were to act on his own, it would create ripples. Of course, there were great risks. Juron's career could be over.

"That's too risky to even consider," Juron said. However, his bold suggestion gave him food for thought. Bureaucracy was indeed getting in his way and it was clear to him that he needed to go around the obstacle.

Therefore, he took what he considered to be the next step. He began a public campaign for a council seat that was coming up for a local election. He decided that, instead of relying on the council to grant him a honorary seat, he needed a proper seat. Funding came from Garrick of course.

While Juron was unpopular among politicians, he was vastly popular among citizens who hadn't gotten to find out his true face. For them, he was the one who hammered United Sol twice.

In the end, he easily won the seat in a district by winning 89% of votes. It was year 9650 77th day. Winning the seat meant he was no longer at the council's mercy. Not only that, he enticed the public to support his case which was to show the powers of Andromeda Union over Freedom colony. His speech and goal were too popular for the council to simply ignore. Eventually, a permission was granted to tackle Freedom colony.

And, with that, the first Andromeda Union-Freedom colony war was about to go underway.

Garrick's fleet of 17,000 cruisers was on its way toward Freedom colony. ETA was 16 days. Garrick was pumped up for more actions while Juron had concerns of his own. He felt that Freedom colony wouldn't have risked this if they weren't confident.

Whatever cards they had, Juron was confident regardless.

When the fleet was just few days before arrival at Freedom colony, urgent news was delivered to Garrick's vessel which was quite frankly expected by Juron.

"3,000 ships from United Sol is present?" Garrack repeated what he was just told by a crew.

"Yes, General, in addition to the colony's own fleet which is 7,000."

Despite of the unexpected news, Garrick remained largely unconcerned. They still outnumbered them greatly.

"There is also a chance that the Nebula pirates might arrive," Juron remarked, "Which is probably unlikely however."

He firmly believed that the Nebula pirates wouldn't be easy to manipulate and call upon whenever Freedom colony liked. He was in fact correct in that assessment.

As soon as Garrick's fleet arrived in the vicinity of Freedom colony, Garrick went on a public channel and demanded an unconditional surrender to Freedom colony which was met with silence.

"Fleet composition report." Garrick ordered on the bridge. Juron was standing next to him.

"Exactly three thousand USF courage from United Sol detected, sir. And seventy one thirty two from Freedom colony, USF courage as well, General."

"So, no mice?" Garrick inquired.

"Negative, General. Both fleets have formed a sphere formation."

Juron was slightly disappointed that the light cruiser, codenamed "mice", wasn't included. But, given how particularly they failed in the first invasion, it was expected

that the design would be abandoned.

"We have the edge, Juron," Garrick said to which Juron gave him a nod.

"Yes, General. Who is the commander of USF fleet?" Juron inquired the crew.

"United Sol fleet is currently led by a commander named Suu Bau."

Juron had very little information regarding Suu. He sent spies without much success. He had no idea about her style of command. In fact, he had very little information regarding Kain in general. This was due to a fact that Kain's inner circle was extremely tight-knit and there was absolutely no room for spies.

"And I suppose Freedom colony fleet is led by Reed?"

"Aye, Councilor."

Leaning his head against his fist, Garrick asked Juron, "What do you think, Juron? Do you think we can do this?"

Juron quickly calculated the odds. There were some unforeseen variables such as Commander Suu but overall he was confident.

"Our victory should be assured, General."

With a big grin on his face, Garrick nodded and stood up from his captain's chair.

"Fire at will!" He bellowed.

As soon as the battle commenced, United Sol's fleet moved away from Freedom colony fleet. Puzzled, Garrick inquired Juron.

"What are they doing?"

Juron had no idea. While he was a fine politician, he was still an amateur when it came to space battles. He did attempt to study but soon realized that Kain and his men never really followed standard protocols.

Once moved away from Freedom fleet, United Sol's fleet dispersed at once and started to sail directly at Garrick's fleet while firing all guns.

"Something is going on!" Garrick exclaimed. Having the slightest clue of what was about to happen, all he had to do was sit and watch United Sol fleet firing missiles at almost point blank range as they violently passed through Garrick's fleet.

Missiles were a high damage weapon but it was rarely used due to its cost and logistics required to support it. Additionally, turrets had become advanced enough to shoot down any incoming missiles from a distance.

Mark the word "distance".

United Sol's fleet did not give the distance and all missiles were hit, causing massive damage to thousands of ships in Garrick's fleet. Some of ships in his fleet started to act independently in order to fend off the marauding attack.

"Stay in the formation!" Garrick bellowed as he watched his fleet lose its formation.

"I repeat stay in the formation!"

They still had to deal with Freedom fleet which was why Garrick wanted a strict formation.

However, it wasn't all that easy to control the fleet as United Sol's fleet continued to swirl around and kept on firing missiles.

"We are losing ships, General!" A crew urgently exclaimed. "Our front line is being battered!"

Slamming a side of his captain's chair, Garrick stood up at once, only to be knocked off the chair after the bridge jolted heavily.

"What the hell is going on?!" He demanded an answer.

"This ship was hit by a missile, sir! Starboard shield at 82%!"

"Have they located us!?"

"Negative! It was just a random missile!"

It was important for the location of a fleet commandship to be unknown to its attackers. In general, it was impossible to locate a fleet commandship specifically, especially in a short period of time.

It was this moment that Juron realized that they were using the exact tactics which Acshell the liberator once used to repeal an invasion force.

"Fucking ironic," He whispered to himself.

Once the initiative was lost, it was an uphill battle for Garrick despite of his numeral advantage. And it wasn't helped by a fact that his fleet was fighting on multiple fronts. While they weren't exactly losing, the loss was mounting.

Juron eventually decided that it wasn't worth it.

When he suggested withdrawing, Garrick went berserk.

"What do you mean withdraw?! We are winning this battle!"

"The loss isn't going to be worth it." Juron asked a random crew on the bridge. "How many have we lost so far?"

After a moment, the crew replied, "About 400 ships, Councilor."

Looking back at Garrick who was fuming, he attempted to reason with him.

"Listen, General, we can win but at a great loss which will delay the third invasion.

We do still have the upper hand and can strike a deal with them right now. There is no need to lose more ships."

Garrick was still fuming although his ire had cooled down a little. He had been pursuing personal fame for many years now without much success. It was becoming frustrating for him. Juron knew this too well.

“General, even if we do win this, it will be small fame. Imagine the reception you will receive when you destroy United Sol. You will become a national hero like your father. Do not forget the bigger picture.”

Progressively, Garrick regained his composure after listening to Juron's advice. Letting out a long sigh and sitting down into the captain's chair, he cleared his throat and a meek grin emerged on his face.

“Yes, indeed,” He replied calmly. “I must not forget the bigger picture.”

It still took few minutes for him to fully calm down, and once he was ready, he gave out an order to seize fire and propose a diplomatic talk which was accepted.

Since Juron was fully aware that he was disliked, he opted Garrick to handle the talk on his own. He simply advised him what to do in the talk.

In the end, a simple non-aggression pact was signed. While this wasn't what Juron wanted at the beginning, this pact would ensure that Freedom colony would not interfere with their ongoing quest to destroy United Sol.

Now with Freedom colony out of his way, he was ready to launch the third invasion on United Sol.

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