

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE:

This story was intended to be a sister chapter to Trooper Barrington's adventures on Highway 95, another short story I have written. It takes place a week later on another continent, and from the perspective of the invading aliens. The motives and methodology of the aliens are detailed, giving hints to the interstellar slave trade that pervades the universe of this particular set of characters.

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## HIGH CENTURION DEVROSHEK'S STORY

### "CHANGE OF COMMAND"

9:15 AM, JANUARY 21<sup>ST</sup>  
FORMER SITE OF THE CITY OF BARCELONA  
SPAIN  
EUROPEAN UNION

The landing shuttle flashed overhead, splitting the air with a roar as it banked across the shattered landscape. The shimmering heat of re-entry surrounded its sleek silhouette like a form-fitting mirage. High Centurion Devroshek grimly watched it on its approach path as small landing gear deployed from its hull. The shuttle's thrusters flared loudly, slowly bringing it closer and closer to the sprayed-down landing pad. Charred dust and sand whipped and blinded the assembled greeting party as the shuttle set down. The various assembled minor dignitaries and sycophants had scurried for cover, while the awaiting detail of marines had stood fast under the assault of biting debris. After a few moments, a door pulled back into the shuttle's seamless silver hull with a hiss. A small ladder and handrail unrolled and stiffened from the hatchway.

Devroshek clacked his fangs loudly, and barked the signal to bring the assembled troops to attention. His one good rear-facing eye quickly surveyed the four razor-straight columns of assault marines behind him, stoically awaiting the invasion commander's arrival. They instantly snapped their heavy laser rifles in front of them in a salute, rigid as statues, when the arriving Vice Admiral's family battle hymn began to play. The speakers continued the harsh and droll Myoshan war march as Vice Admiral Kren slowly descended the stairway, a sour, disinterested look on his face. He yawned at the base of the ladder, waiting for the end of the booming, martial theme. As the tune faded to an end, the

marines snapped their weapons back to their sides as one. Vice Admiral Kren surveyed his troops with a tepid gaze, and began his visibly bored review of the assembled formation.

High Centurion Devroshek silently hid his disgust with the pompous fop, snapping out a clenched-fisted salute at the Vice Admiral's approach. Kren had been the invasion commander in name only, a title bestowed upon him because of aristocratic connections. A blind and deaf sewage transport ship's captain would have been more qualified militarily for the position.

However, as was the way of the Myoshan Empire, the most powerful and influential families had politicked which amongst their assembled houses would secure the charter to pluck this plump target of a planet. The winning house could, by tradition, also allow younger races to purchase rights to a portion of the spoils. These races were usually species that were still building their interstellar resources, parlaying their newly acquired freedom into conquering other primitive beings. It was a vicious cycle, but it was how the ways of the Realm worked.

The winning house also won the right to choose the commander of such a giant and profitable undertaking. The Vice Admiral, through accident of birth, happened to be a member of one such elite family, the House of Korlann. Despite such breeding, only a waffling, narcissistic moron like Kren could have 'mismanaged' such a pedestrian, though lucrative, assignment. 'Butchered' was an equally appropriate term, considering the apocalyptic loss of life inflicted during the invasion.

Despite the bloodbath, Devroshek was sure that Kren would find a way to spin this fiasco to his advantage, like the sliming, scheming *frakken* that he was reputed to be. The Vice Admiral was definitely a true member of House Korlann. His father, Kaybenn, had brought some iron to the name, distinguishing them from the typical Myoshan "noble" house. Kaybenn had been an anomaly. His kinsmen were mired in the treacherous and insidious political wrangling that passed for the machinations of court life on Myosha. Kren, unfortunately, was no different.

Devroshek had served under Kren's father for years on countless campaigns, from the siege in the Polirian Ring to the Garnshk Insurrection on Xanth. All were hard-fought victories, all at the side of one of the most brilliant Myoshan military minds to ever don a suit of command armor. To look at the son of Kaybenn made Devroshek want to rip out his own fangs in disgust.

Now the perfumed coward was finally deigning to place his paws on conquered soil, days after the planetary bombardment had ceased. The High Centurion had grated under the preening fool's commands since the invasion fleet broke orbit over Myosha, having to constantly remind his "superior" of the simplest Imperial battle protocols and the Realm laws of war. Against Devroshek's adamant warnings, Kren had placed the coalition fleet in near-planetary orbit en masse, making it vulnerable to counterattack from the natives' primitive fission and thermonuclear weaponry.

Through a series of tactical blunders, the target world's defenses had managed to launch a few hundred scattered missiles, mostly from the two

northern land masses' central regions. Though only a handful of star ships had been lost from the missile launches, most had been from the Shasarr component of the armada. The Shasarr were a young and bloodthirsty warrior race of reptilians on their first major venture in the taking of Subject stock. Their surviving ship commanders, blind with rage, had hissed and screamed for the use of point fusion weapons, justifiable under the Realm's laws of war. Despite Devroshek's counsel, Vice Admiral Kren had foolishly granted their request with the flitting wave of a claw.

Kren had been ignorant, however, of the zeal with which the Shasarr conducted the business of war under their former masters, the T'Bok. The surviving ships had bathed the planet's northern hemisphere in star-hot flame, hammering every major population center with fusion warheads. Most had been air-dropped directly by strike cruisers over each city, an up-close-and-personal approach that was typical of the Shasarr's savage fighting style. Those targets that hadn't warranted a fusion weapon had been lasered savagely. Homes, buildings, and cities had been sliced and burned with weapons usually reserved for enemy starships or fighter craft. Billions had perished in the fiery orgy of genocide.

Devroshek's disgust with the massive casualties hadn't sprung from compassion for these primitive conquered mammals, but rather on the lost revenue and slave stock destroyed in the planetary orgy of bloodletting. The entire point of this chartered fleet between newly-freed races and the Myoshans had been for the youngling civilizations to gain slaves of their own. Now that the Shasarr had slain over 80 percent of the world's population in a matter of days, the slave stocks would have to be portioned out after a re-breeding program, a costly delay that could take years, if not decades.

Had Kren shown some spine or intelligence initially and reined in those damned lizards, all parties involved could have been shipping their share of the planetary yield offworld. Instead, they were now picking through the charred rubble, searching for feasible survivors to put in a breeding program. The slaves wouldn't be doled out for decades. Such wasteful idiocy, and it could have been stopped with a single word, if the Vice Admiral had not been such a quivering idiot.

Kren sauntered, disinterested, across the front of the formation of assault marines. As he passed Devroshek, he feebly returned the High Centurion's out-thrust salute. As the Vice Admiral continued on, Devroshek abruptly chopped his raised fist back to his side, pivoted smartly, and began to walk with his alleged commander. As the two boarded a waiting open-topped hovercar, a senior member of Devroshek's planning staff dismissed the platoon with a muted bark and paired fang-clicks.

Devroshek sat across from the Vice Admiral in the vehicle's padded rear compartment. As soon as they were both seated, Kren nodded to the hover transport's driver, and they were off.

"Have we established a count of the surviving population yet, Centurion?" Kren asked.

“Yes, your eminence. Survey teams estimate only an 18% survival rate, based on earlier estimates of planetary population. The margin of error of the estimates is roughly two percent, to account for refugees that have fled to outlying areas from the cities. Most were contained by your eminence’s invasion forces,” was the High Centurion’s business-like reply.

“And the counts for slave stocks? Is House Korlann’s percentage arranged and prepped for transport?” Kren referred to his family’s negotiated portion of the slave population, a handsome fee for the effort to subjugate this backwater world.

“No, my lord, if I might remind you again, all disbursements of slave stocks are suspended, pending a review of genetic impact studies. The Ministry of Subject Affairs has signaled that they might be stepping in to-“

Kren interrupted with an exasperated sigh, “Oh, those insufferable twits. I’ve seen their foot-dragging before, Centurion. The Rhovan campaign, under my Uncle Ga’laat. It took years to release the slave stocks.”

“Yes, my lord, I remember. Like then, this present situation could have been avoided as well. All it would have taken was-“

Again, Kren interrupted with an upheld palm, becoming more irritated. Subordinates were supposed to be that very thing: subordinate. This High Centurion had been pushed on to him by his dying father, and he had proven more trouble than he was worth. Always nagging, always prodding, never giving the young Vice Admiral a moment’s peace.

The invasion commander made a mental note to have him purged when they returned to their mutual home of Myosha. Dead Centurions told no tales, and the Shasarr incident could be neatly pinned on the arrogant blusterer. Kren wondered what his father saw in Devroshek. The two probably had a great deal in common, with their swaggering mannerisms and rough ways. The same traits were the reason Kren’s father was never a favorite at the Korlann family court. He was always off gallivanting on some alien world instead of securing Kren’s future amongst the vicious workings of the family’s hierarchy. Now Kren was doomed to follow in his father’s footsteps, conquering primitive planets instead of staying on Myosha and engaging in the politics and intrigues that so thrilled him. He began to work over in his mind how he would have Devroshek disposed of, and how to work the situation to his advantage.

“Yes, yes, Centurion, I know: the Shasarr. Notifications will be made to their former masters. Who did you say they were once under, again?”

“The T’Bok, my lord.”

“Ah, yes, the T’Bok. Moronic creatures, the T’Bok. It is no wonder the Shasarr were able to free themselves from those drooling insects.” Kren sniffed at the air, sampling it almost delicately. It had a scorched and sour quality to it, dreadfully unpleasant. As their transport made its way through the rubble of the former city, he saw why. Burned and decaying limbs and bodies could be seen projecting here and there from the shattered ruins, blending in with the jutting pipes and shattered concrete of the city’s wreckage. Flies and choking ash roiled

in the hovercar's wake as it made its way down one of the last recognizable paved streets in Barcelona.

"Well, enough of that. What is on my agenda for today, Centurion?" the Vice Admiral asked.

"Your eminence, we are enroute to this city's harbor to inspect a captured native combat vessel. You may recall that many of the planet's missiles had come from underwater craft, previously hidden undetected beneath the planet's oceans," the Centurion had seen intelligence reports on these ingeniously-engineered vessels, gathered mostly from data collection sites like libraries. Most of the underwater craft had been quickly lasered from orbit, or obliterated by point-fusion detonations that had simultaneously boiled entire cubic miles of ocean water. Much to Devroshek's delight, however, one underwater craft had surrendered just off the coast of this large peninsula, the stunned victim of a fusion weapon's near-miss. He was considering having the thing cut up and exported offworld to his home of East Bermala, on Myosha's main southern continent. Being the military advisor to a planetary invasion commander, even one as stupid as Kren, had its side benefits. The "submarine", as it was called, would make a handsome centerpiece for his family estate's prized hanging gardens.

"And why would I be interested in such a thing, Centurion?"

"The vessel would be a trophy to your skill in planning this invasion, your eminence. A reminder of your mighty victory, of course." Even a moron such as Kren wouldn't be able to ignore the sardonic nature of Devroshek's hollow fawnings. The High Centurion began to wonder whether he should have the weakling killed, perhaps a shuttle accident on the voyage back to his orbiting command ship.

A muted, grumbling sigh was the bored Vice Admiral's only reply. Kren quickly grew tired of the shattered landscape, and turned his attention to a small pocket viewer, a palm-sized holographic projector, that had been laid out for him on the hovercar's seat. Depressing a small button yielded a rotating midair image of a native male and female adult, naked and dissected, with their appendages and organs splayed out on a Myoshan examination table. Clicking absentmindedly through the images of human physiology, the invasion commander yawned again in the planet's relatively thin air, and turned the viewer off.

"Not very durable creatures for their size, are they, Centurion?"

"No, sir, they're very susceptible to damage. Surprising, really. Perhaps they will make good laborers, or maybe even domestic servants with the right manipulations. One type appears to be a breeder and nurturer, the other an impregnator and protector. They have developed thermonuclear weaponry, true, but they don't seem to have any redeeming warrior qualities beyond their size. Gentle idiot savants, perhaps?"

"I have enough domestic and craftsman servants, Centurion. We appear to have wasted our time with these upright softskins. Perhaps the lesser races of this coalition can put them to some use."

The first sensical thing the moron had said all day, Devroshek thought. "I would tend to agree, your eminence. From their token defensive measures, and the feeble resistance they've put up since we've landed, the reports from the scout ships appear to have been completely off base." Fortunately, the Realm always needed free labor. These conquered subjects would have a role in the galaxy's hierarchical civilization, whether they wished to or not.

The pair spent the next few minutes in silence as the hovercar keened and glided along the primitive road. Eventually, the fusion-melted street led them to the sea's coast, where a giant cylinder awaited them awkwardly on the shore. It had been run aground, tilting to one side and revealing its red-painted belly. A finned tower jutted from its blackened upper surface. The tower was a wreck, chewed to pieces no doubt by the same detonations that had forced the vessel to surrender. The massively inefficient machine was crawling with Myoshan engineers and scientists. Its only visible weapons were hatches through which explosive projectiles were ejected at other enemy maritime vessels or in ballistic arcs. The missiles and torpedoes were self-guided, but equally primitive as their mothership. Devroshek found the combat system painfully obsolete, yet rustically charming, and he was looking forward to walking through its giant-sized corridors.

Assault marines had rounded up the vessel's crew, and were guarding the assembled wretches some distance from the beached ship. The soft skinned natives were easily twice the height of the largest Myoshan, but one of their number had learned, the hard way, that resistance earned a laser-edged bayonet through the thigh. The instant loss of its leg, followed immediately by a rifle pulse that tore a steaming hole through its torso, had quickly cowed the remainder of its comrades into quiet submission.

One of the group had been separated from its comrades, under guard by a pair of Myoshan assault marines. Kren alighted from the bobbing hovercar, and proceeded directly towards the lone captive. The High Centurion initially bristled with a protective reflex, then thought better of it. These natives were hardly a threat, and besides, he was done covering for the junior invasion commander.

"Why is that one by himself, marine?" Kren asked the nearest armored Myoshan guard.

Promptly saluting, the marine replied, "This one appears to have been in command, your eminence. His markings and uniform are different from the others. He has been curled in this position since we pulled him from the group."

Vice Admiral Kren ordered the marines to bring the cringing native up to its knees. Even in this subordinate position, the native was of equal stature with a standing Myoshan. Kren turned its head to one side, then the other, like a merchant looking over a new purchase. The giant was transfixed with the sight of the Vice Admiral, regaled in ornate garments that were in stark contrast to the battle armors and exploratory hardsuits of the other Myoshans it had seen up till now. The two assault marines thumped its broad back with the butts of their

laser carbines when it pulled away from Kren's probing inspection of its eyes. Other members of the native's shivering crew began to stand and call out in their native tongues. Were they jeering, or advising the lone subject to submit? Devroshek had still not seen the reports on the planet's myriad patterns of spoken languages.

The marines guarding the large group bristled as the vessel's crew stood, clacking their fangs behind their armors' face plates, and visibly displaying their glowing bayonets. Kren finished his brief look at the creature's ocular cavities, nodded to the two marines, and turned his back on the captive. It was to be the final error in a long line of mistakes.

The nearest marine, lulled by the native's compliance, was barely able to bark an alarm before his faceplate was smashed in by his own carbine. Reeling from the blow, he stumbled into his partner, whose aimed laser fire was bumped off target. The native, rising to its full height, bellowed as its left arm erupted in flames, then a boiling vapor as the laser still found its mark. Devroshek watched in awe as the giant arose, kicking the marine with the smashed visor as its own severed hand fell to the sand, still grasping the muzzle of the carbine it had used as a club. It fumbled with its good arm for a round object it had kept hidden on its person. A pinging noise filled the air as a spring ejected a piece of metal off the surface of the round portion of the object.

Kren, a painfully obvious coward, squealed and ran for the false security of the open-topped hovercar. Devroshek dove for cover behind a small rise in the sand, his rear eye tracking the hurled object, which spat and hissed in midair as it arced over him. Kren and the object arrived in the vehicle simultaneously. Devroshek saw the one-armed giant seize and buck as a bayonet ripped him apart from spine to sternum. Bedlam erupted as the rest of the captured crew hooted and swore in their native tongues. Some began to assault their captors. A crashing silence reigned after the interior of the hovercar erupted with a thunderclap of grayish smoke. Fragments of grenade and invasion commander splashed in all directions. Devroshek felt the familiar sting of shrapnel in his legs and under his good rear eye.

The marines gaped in shocked horror, until another of the giants picked one of them up with a single hand to beat him in midair. The huge native cocked back a balled fist, and then the lasering began.

The rebelling members of the crew were cut to steaming pieces. Out of reach of their horrific strength, the Myoshan marines made short work of them, dicing them to bits as their screams and boiling fluids filled the air. It was over in a matter of seconds.

Brushing the sand from his armor and wiping the blood from the back of his neck, he stood to the rich, sour smell of charred native flesh. A quick survey of the shattered hovercar's interior revealed the shredded entrails of the late Vice Admiral Kren, formerly of House Korlann.

It had been all been a chaotic blur. One moment Kren was a dangerously moronic fool, the next a stain on the inside of a shredded surface transport. Painfully, he called the marine commander to his side. Devroshek silenced the

blubbering apologies and offers for ritual suicide, calling instead for his command radio and a combat medic.

*“Brightfang, Brightfang, this is High Centurion Devroshek. I have assumed command of the fleet. Have the late Vice Admiral’s shuttle come to my position for recovery. Prepare a messenger frigate for jump to Myosha to inform House Korlann. Devroshek out.”*

Well, that solved the Kren problem, the High Centurion mused. Though he had once held these natives in contempt, there might be more to this conquered race of bipeds than he initially thought. What did they call themselves? “Hyoomunz?” A strange name. Nevertheless, some had shown spirit even in the face of overwhelming defeat.

Despite their many failings, that trait was something the slave stock regeneration program was going to have to save, even expound upon. These soft yet towering primates might have their uses after all. The Realm always needed cannon fodder, and giant war slaves, especially with the right modifications, would fetch a handsome price. Devroshek was brought back from his thoughts by a smell far more foul than burnt aristocrat’s flesh wafting up from the interior of the hovercar.

The shamed marine commander looked on in amazement as the High Centurion leaned on wounded legs against the side of the hovercar, chuckling softly to himself and plugging his olfactory nerve ports. The chuckle turned to outright laughter, and the invasion’s new leader asked him, “Well, commander, take a look at that splatter pattern. Do you think our dearly departed Vice Admiral’s bowels were ventilated by the explosion, or do you think he soiled himself before it detonated, and the device merely spread the excrement around?”

Devroshek was still grinning from fang to fang all the way up to orbit.