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# YOUNGLING

## A Terran Empire Story

by Ann Wilson

Unnamed world, 2559 CE

Joste was waiting in front of his desk when two guards brought the just-captured human into his office. He found it hard to look at the man without becoming physically ill, and wondered briefly how the guards could tolerate touching him. Well, that was their job; his was to question the man, and he found himself hoping the foul thing would resist, give him an excuse to use force.

It wasn't because the other was human, or because he was an enemy -- Joste had questioned prisoners before without having had the slightest desire to use physical persuasion -- and the man looked no more repulsive than any other human. Granted, he was dirty and his battledress was torn, but that was to be expected from someone who had been in combat. And, though he was bound, the man held himself proudly.

No, the revulsion wasn't caused by anything so straightforward. It was what the man had done -- Joste's thoughts shied away from consideration of such obscenity, and he had to force them back. Simply endangering females without dire need was enough to earn a dishonorable death; they were so terribly few, less than a fourth of the Traitit race, cherished for themselves and honored for the young only they could bear -- a thing that happened less often than any could wish.

And this monster had actually led females into combat!

He brought himself under control; the grammar and harsh sounds of Imperial English were difficult enough without having to fight emotion at the same time. "Yourself identify," he growled.

"Major Horst Marguerre, Imperial Terran Marine Corps." It didn't look at all good for him, Marguerre thought grimly. These huge gray-skinned humanoids were aggressive as hell -- they were nicknamed Sharks as much for that as for the facial resemblance -- and this one looked even less well-intentioned toward him than his guards did. "My ident code's TERHE6-2063-4121. What're you doing with my wounded?"

"They are medical treatment receiving," Joste said. "Though there little chance for their recovery is, the physicians their best doing are." At least, he thought, the man had the decency to show concern -- even if it had to be false concern -- for the two survivors of his raiding party, both of whom were female. "What your purpose was, here coming?"

Marguerre didn't know what caused the loathing he could sense from the three massive Traiti, but it was intense enough to frighten him in spite of almost a year's active combat. Still, fear or no fear, he wasn't about to tell them what they wanted to know. He shook his head. "Sorry, that's all I'm allowed to say."

Then he winced as the one holding his shoulder and neck tightened that grip, and the one doing the questioning started to smile. This, to put it mildly, looked less and less like it was going to be a friendly party, and he was suddenly very thankful he'd been given the anti-interrogation conditioning before this mission. Not that he intended to use it unless he had no other choice.

Good, Joste thought. The man was going to be stubborn. "You mine now are, Major, and you will much more say. When you have enough pain had, you will to me gladly speak." Slowly, almost luxuriously, he reached for the man, extending his claws.

Marguerre tasted fear, his mouth bitter-dry as he watched the clawed gray hand approach. He remained still, though he could feel himself going pale. He'd expected death if the mission failed, but not like this -- not being tortured for information while two of his people lay badly wounded in a Traiti military hospital. He knew his interrogator was right; everyone had a breaking point. He could only hope they'd kill him before he came so close to his own that he'd have to activate the conditioning. He preferred to meet death knowing who he was.

A sudden flashing movement of Joste's claws ripped the tough material of the human's shirt to ribbons, exposing the soft undershirt. A single claw took care of that, still without breaking thin human skin. "Why did you here come?" Joste asked softly. "Now say, and yourself much pain save. You no honor have to lose."

Now what the hell did he mean by that, Marguerre wondered. Not that it really mattered, under the circumstances. "Forget it. I'm a Marine, not a traitor." His muscles were tensed in anticipation, but it didn't help much. He gasped and flinched anyway when the claws touched his flesh, digging in and across, drawing blood.

Joste was fully aware of human frailty, and was being far gentler than he cared to, but he was still startled at the amount of blood welling from such shallow wounds. He would have to be even more careful; if he weren't, this Marguerre might bleed to death before giving him the information he needed. It might be best to use fists or slaps instead of claws or teeth, at least for the most part, until the time came to execute the man.

"Why?" he asked again.

"Go to hell," Marguerre snarled.

"We do not that belief hold," Joste said calmly. "And if either of us to such a place going is, it will you be. I

have never a female to her death sent."

"And I have. So? Nobody forced them to join the Marines, or apply for Special Forces. They knew what they were getting into. Every last one of them's a volunteer."

Joste growled in disgust. The human must think him a fool, to expect him to believe such nonsense! The only time a female fought was in last-ditch defense of the clan, something that hadn't happened since the clan was almost four thousand years ago. "You lie, human."

Marguerre shrugged, awkwardly because of his bound hands, but said no more. He'd already said more than he should have; he knew the best way to avoid giving anything away by accident was to remain silent except for the required identification information.

"Enough of that," Joste said. He'd not discuss females more with this perverted filth. "Now you will me truth give. Why came you here?"

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It was almost dark, and Joste was becoming discouraged. The man, except for sounds of pain, had remained silent. He was sprawled on the floor now, naked except for his own blood, his hands no longer bound because he no longer had hands to bind.

Yet he was trying to rise, had actually made it to his knees with his wrists pressed against his chest and his head bowed to hide empty eye sockets, in a sickening parody of one paying homage to the Lords.

Marguerre knew he was done. The pain, the maiming, were too much . . . and his tormentor wasn't going to allow him to die by accident. He had to activate the conditioning or buy his death with the information the Traiti wanted. For a Marine, that was no real choice -- but there was one thing he wanted to make absolutely clear before he went out. "Joste . . . "

"Speak, human."

"You said . . . I've got no honor." Marguerre raised his head, faced the sound of Joste's voice. "Maybe not . . . your kind, I don't know. I'd . . . hoped you'd miscalculate . . . kill me clean . . . 'fore it came to this. Now I just want you . . . t'be certain . . . I do know what I'm doing." He straightened as much as he was able, drew in breath, and forced himself to speak the single short phrase he'd chosen. Hearing himself say it, deliberately, would wipe out Major Horst Marguerre.

Nonsense syllables, Joste thought. "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves"?

For a space of seconds, there was no sound -- then Marguerre collapsed with the heart-rending wail of a hurt, terrified youngling, to lie sobbing brokenly at Joste's feet.

Stunned, the interrogator could only stare, then he dropped to one knee beside the bloody form. "Human . . . what wrong is?"

The face that turned toward him had nothing of the proud Marine in it, only pain and fear. The man had said he knew what he was doing -- what had he done? Whatever it was, there was clearly no point in questioning him further. With a sigh, Joste picked up his prisoner and stood.

Unbelievably, that seemed to comfort the man. He nestled closer to Joste's chest, and the sobs slowed to whimpers, then ceased. His breathing showed he had gone to sleep.

Joste and the guards exchanged amazed glances. "What did you do to him, Group-Leader?" the younger one asked.

"I did nothing, Sedni. What has happened to him was his own choice, he said. He had hoped to die before this became necessary." Joste looked down at his burden, troubled by the man's sudden change. "He resisted me with all his will, yet now he clings to me for comfort, as a newborn clings to its mother. He seems not to know me any longer, perhaps not to know himself."

"As one who has lost all memory?" the older guard asked.

"I think . . . not lost," Joste said slowly. "He told me he knew what he was doing, and I believe him."

"What, then?"

"I cannot be sure yet . . . but he fought me as well as he was able, though he must have known he had no way to win, and I denied him the escape of death. Had he lacked honor as I thought, he would have spoken in an effort to live -- but he did not." Joste hesitated. He had underestimated the man; perhaps Marguerre had spoken the truth earlier. Perhaps he had truly felt no dishonor in leading females into combat -- a thing that was difficult to believe, but so was his sudden change from a defiant Marine to a sobbing . . . what? "Not lost," Joste repeated thoughtfully. "Far worse, if what I begin to suspect is true. It would appear that he destroyed his mind rather than betray his people."

"Not even a human would go that far!" Sedni exclaimed, his voice shaken.

"I would prefer a more acceptable idea myself," Joste said. Death came to everyone, soon or late; in the long run, it was unavoidable, and at times a self-inflicted death was the only way to preserve honor -- far preferable to the alternative of living dishonored. The idea of someone destroying his own mind, though -- even for the same purpose -- was one that made the Traiti interrogator recoil. Still, at this point it was only a possibility, not a certainty. Joste glanced at the human again, then began giving orders. "Chorvak, call the hospital and tell them I'm bringing in an emergency patient. And find out if either of the females survived and is able to talk. Sedni, go to Communications and have them stand by for a possible priority call to N'chark clanhome on Norvis. I may need to talk to Ka'ruchaya Jarna."

Both saluted, and Sedni left while Chorvak went to Joste's desk to make the call. The interrogator left as well, carrying the sleeping human.

Within minutes he had covered the short distance to the hospital and was putting the mangled man on an emergency surgical table. Marguerre seemed to partially awaken when Joste put him down, whimpering softly until the duty surgeon gave him a sedative.

"What's wrong with him?" the surgeon asked. "Aside from the obvious, I mean."

"I am not certain," Joste told him. "I am not even sure I really want to know, but I must check. Give him support treatment until I can, please."

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Chorvak was waiting when Joste left the surgery. "The tiny dark-skinned female is dead, Group-Leader," he reported, "but the bigger pale one's injuries were less serious than the physicians originally thought; she is alive and regaining consciousness. They will allow you to speak to her as long as you keep it brief and do not excite her."

"Thank you, Chorvak. I will be careful."

The hospital was small, so it didn't take long for the two to get to the room assigned to the human woman. Joste went in alone, took a seat by her bed. "Ka'naya Marine, may I with you speak?"

"Uh?" She looked at him, clearly still groggy and trying to focus. "Wha' 'bout?"

Joste puzzled over that momentarily, then he figured out the slurred words. "About Major Horst Marguerre, ka'naya. When I was him questioning, he something said that did not English seem, a code of some sort, I think. Then he cried out, and like a youngling wept. Can you me tell, what to him happened?"

She seemed to rouse at Marguerre's name. "Something not English? But he doesn't know any other language -- " Then her eyes widened, and she looked sick. "Blood . . . is it his?"

Joste's silence answered her. Tears leaked out of her eyes and she swore tiredly. "Damn you, you bastard Shark. What'd you do to break him?"

"Ask me that not, ka'naya. The answer would only you distress, and he is help now getting. But I must know, when he those strange words said, what he by them meant. What they to him did."

"Maybe I'd rather not know, at that." She scowled. "What'll you do to him if I tell you?"

"If it what I fear is, I will my Ka'ruchaya -- you have not the term, female parent to the clan -- ask, him to adopt. N'chark will for him care."

"Clan mother. But he's human -- why would you do that?"

"He something to himself did, that him into the likeness of a youngling turned. If that likeness a true one is, then he must a youngling's safety and guidance given be." He paused for a moment. "And it my opinion is, that what he did was from honor done."

"It was. I'm not sure I believe you, but telling you what happened can't make it any worse for him. Okay, you're right. The words themselves're meaningless, they were only triggers for anti-interrogation conditioning, a total mind-wipe. Didn't bother anything else, like intelligence, just memory. It's a new technique, but a lot of us already have it . . . " She turned her head away briefly, then went on. "You could say he has the mind of a newborn child in an adult body. Who was the first person he saw after he . . . blanked out?"

"He has no one seen."

"I can guess why." She grimaced. "Damn. Okay, who was the first one he heard? If he can still hear."

"He can, ka'naya. And I the first was."

She gave him a mocking grin. "Hi, Daddy. If the psychs were right, he's fixated on you, now. How do you feel about taking care of babies?"

In spite of the dismay he felt at her confirmation of his worst suspicion, Joste couldn't help a smile. "Ka'naya Marine, I have only once the joy had, of sharing young. Say you he will truly me as es'chaya see? Male parent?"

"Father?" The Marine's grin softened into an answering smile at his obvious sincerity. "Not exactly. That, yes, but more. He's your child -- yours alone -- unless he heard someone else about the same time he heard you."

"There no one was, ka'naya. He in my arms asleep was, before another spoke. I your leave to go must ask; I should Ka'ruchaya Jarna call."

She looked worried. "Okay, I guess you will take care of Major Marguerre. But what'll happen to me? So far I've been treated all right, but I'm afraid that won't -- "

"Ka'naya!" Joste interrupted, horrified by what she was implying. "You need nothing fear. You will guarded be, of course, but no harm will to you come! We not like humans twisted are, a female to hurt without great need."

As her expression began to show relief, Joste gave her a courteous salute and left for the Communications section. Sedni wasn't the only one waiting there for him; so was his commander, Senior Group-Leader Kunnos.

"Sedni briefed me," Kunnos said. "May I listen to your call?"

"Of course, Group-Leader." It wasn't usually 'of course,' but Joste had served under Kunnos for a long time, long enough to trust his discretion even in N'chark's clan matters.

Clan priority traffic got the same treatment as military communications, so it didn't take long for the operator to make ultrawave contact with N'chark clanhome, then leave to join Sedni. Nor did it take long, once contact was made, for Ka'ruchaya Jarna to appear on the comscreen. Joste greeted her formally, crossing arms over his chest and inclining his head. Kunnos followed suit, bowing more deeply as befit an out-clan male.

Jarna acknowledged the greeting, then looked curiously at Joste. "Ruesten, you have won the Honor scars; what problem can you have so serious that it requires my intervention?"

"Ka'ruchaya, it is a matter of adoption."

"Ah, I see. Go on."

Joste did as he was told, describing the human's torment, memory loss, and what the female Marine had told him. "Maybe he was being honest when he said the females volunteered for combat. Certainly the one I spoke to showed pain at his hurt. And he did prove himself honorable, sacrificing his mind -- himself -- as he did. Ka'ruchaya, he needs help, and I think that once he learns our ways, he will be a credit to N'chark."

"He lost only his memory?"

"Yes, Ka'ruchaya, according to the female Marine."

"And she called him your 'child,' your esten." Jarna paused, thinking. "No, Cor'naya Joste. Under the circumstances, I do not think adoption either possible or necessary; he cannot take the blood-oath if he cannot understand it. He is a Terran, and apparently newborn by their ways, regarding you as chaya. I accept him as es'ruesten, a clan-son of N'chark by birth. Care for him, see that he gets the medical help he needs -- including regrowth treatments if they are available there -- and bring him home as soon as he is able to travel. If you wish, I will arrange for his naming ceremony."

"Thank you, Ka'ruchaya. Let him be named Horst, of Clan N'chark."

"So be it, Cor'naya Joste." Jarna turned to Kunnos. "I will send a ship for them, Group-Leader. Will you need a linguist to replace Joste?"

"If you please, Ka'ruchaya. Stanek, if he has recovered."

"He will be on the ship." Jarna's expression became grim. "But hear my words, Group-Leader: none of my n'ruesten will force another to this living self-destruction again. I will not have them dishonor themselves so."

"I would not ask it, Ka'ruchaya," Kunnos said. "I will report this to the Supreme, with the recommendation that he order any found to have similar conditioning questioned no further." He extended claws to emphasize his determination. "I have no wish to be part of such dishonor, either."

"Well said, Group-Leader." Jarna inclined her head. "Now if you will excuse me, I must return to my duties."

The two males bowed, then when the screen cleared, left the Communications section. Joste made his way back to the hospital to check on his child, wondering at the Lords' ordering of things. The human and he had met as enemies, and Joste had taken angry pleasure in his torment. But now Horst was of N'chark, he would be raised as such . . . and this time, Joste vowed, Horst would be raised with a proper respect for females and younglings.

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