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## THAKUR-NA

A Terran Empire story

by Ann Wilson

Sandeman, 2624 CE

It was midafternoon before Dana's hunger overcame her excitement at being on Sandeman, hiking with her chosen lord -- her thakur, in the Sandeman term she preferred -- and trying to track a balik. She hadn't gotten within two hundred meters of the wolflike predator, and had finally realized she wasn't going to, so the two found a small clearing with bare rocks which made decent seating. Jason dug hot-cans of trail food out of his hiking pack, Dana did the same with cold-cans of fortified milk, and they sat eating and drinking in silence. They were putting the empty cans back in their packs when Dana began looking around, frowning.

"What is it?" Jason asked.

"I thought I heard something . . . brushing against branches, snow falling . . . but no other predators would invade a balik's territory, and it's probably kilometers away by now."

"Other tourists, maybe. Clan Torrance is supposed to have a hunting party in the area, but they aren't due till tomorrow noon."

Dana made a face. "I was hoping we wouldn't see anyone else till we got to the pickup point."

"So was I -- but not even I can have everything my own way all the time."

"No," Dana agreed with a chuckle, "you just come close. Maybe if we leave now?"

"I think it's too late." Jason stood as half a dozen men entered the clearing. "Good afternoon, gentles."

"Not for you it isn't," the obvious leader said. "You don't go anywhere without a couple thousand credits petty cash, Mister Jason -- hand it over."

"In the mountains?" Jason laughed. "Not even I carry cash where there's nothing to buy and no bodyguards."

"Like hell," the leader said pleasantly. "Hand it over, Jason, or we take it out of your hide."

"I told you, I don't have anything to hand over."

"Then we'll take what you don't have." The leader gave a hand signal, and his men surrounded Jason. He grunted and swore at them, his voice holding a mixture of disgusted anger and pain.

"NO!" Dana shouted, jumping on the back of one man and wrapping her left arm around his throat, her right hand against the back of his head, her left reaching for her right elbow for a neck-breaking hold.

She was pulled off before she could complete it, held securely despite her struggles while the attackers gave her thakur a fast frisking.

"Hell, he was telling the truth," the leader finally said in disgust. "No trace of a wallet or anything that'd hold that kind of cash." He backhanded Jason, almost casually. "You've been one hell of a lot of trouble, Jason, for no return. Want to try convincing us we shouldn't kill you for it?"

"You can't kill him!" Dana exclaimed, horrified. "He's -- You just can't!" She took a deep breath; these men would need more than her emotions to discourage them. "Jason Interstellar's Security people wouldn't quit till they found you, and they'd make sure you were punished."

One of the two holding her fondled her roughly. "Maybe have some fun with the fem before we kill both of 'em, Ca -- Boss?"

Dana was too angry to be frightened; she twisted to give him a scornful look, then glared at the leader, who gave her a frightening smile before he pointed to two of his men. "You, you -- knock him out, then tie him to a tree; he'll be found before he starves."

Dana took comfort in the knowledge that he would be; the Torrance hunting party should find him the next day, before he even got really hungry. Then the designated ones did as they were told; Jason slumped under an expertly-applied baton to the base of his skull, then was secured to a small tree.

Dana had time to wonder at the use of a baton -- criminals didn't normally use that sort of weapon -- before the leader approached her, holding another one. He looked at her consideringly, then nodded. "I've seen better, but you're not too bad. I like redheads, they tend to be spunky." He grabbed her jaw, forced her mouth up for a rough kiss.

She took advantage of that; as soon as he was within reach, she bit him.

He swore, backhanded her, then signaled the two holding her to let go. "Spunk's one thing, lady, but you've just bought yourself more hurt than you've ever had. Fight if you want to; that'll just make it more fun."

Dana moved back, licking blood from a split lip as she dropped into an awkward protective crouch. She really should have paid more attention to the unarmed-combat lessons Chief Hanson had insisted she at least watch . . . but it was too late now, facing the leader's feral grin and twirling baton. Fear was a coppery taste in her

mouth, and sweat trickled down her back under the enviro-suit.

The leader could obviously tell he had an inexperienced opponent, because his grin became a laugh. Then he moved with smooth, deceptive swiftness, and before Dana could back away or defend herself, his baton lashed out, seeming to do no more than tap her forearms -- until she tried to move them.

She gasped with the pain, somehow managing not to cry out, trying to focus on the use of batons by thieves. The pain did have an advantage, though; it helped her distract herself from what took place next. She kept fighting, but it was by pure reflex, and she couldn't keep herself from being stripped, or ignore the sudden cold air against skin no longer protected by an enviro-suit, or the other pain and humiliation as six men took turns using her body. Neither the pain nor the odd weapons were enough, though. She couldn't concentrate on them single-mindedly enough to block out everything the attackers were doing to her, and before they were done, she heard herself whimpering. By the time they finished the rapes and began a general beating, she could no longer control her reactions; she fought and screamed and wept, to no effect, until she felt consciousness starting to depart, and welcomed it.

Shouts and weapon-fire interrupted her descent into peace, something she resented even as she knew it meant safety for her thakur and perhaps for herself. Then someone knelt beside her, and even with pain blurring her vision, she could tell it was a Sandeman; that dark skin and blond hair didn't belong to any of their attackers. "Warrior . . ." she managed to whisper.

"Yes, Garvey DarTorrance. And you?"

"Dana Manfredi, thakur-na to Richard Jason. He's all right?"

"Unconscious, but not hurt."

"Good." Dana sighed, relief letting her outraged body take over; she passed out.

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The time Dana spent unconscious was less peaceful than it should have been. She dreamed, bits and pieces of her relationship with Richard Jason, from meeting him shortly after her college graduation, to swearing fealty, to the mountain hike that had ended so disastrously.

She woke slowly, realizing as she did that she had been reliving a dream become nightmare, that she was actually in a hospital; the smell was unmistakable. Her next awareness was that she was blissfully free of pain, and she spent several minutes enjoying something she had taken for granted before.

Then she heard the room's door open and stirred herself to look toward it. The one who came in was a Sandeman, a warriors'-woman from the gold-gemmed ring she wore; Dana inclined her head in the closest she could come to a bow.

"Good afternoon, Dana," the w'woman said. "I am Mona, a warriors'-woman of Clan Lewies and your doctor. How do you feel?"

"Better than I would've thought possible when the warrior Garvey found me," Dana said. "Thanks for everything you've done for me."

"My pleasure," the w'woman said. "Fortunately you were found before your attackers did anything life-threatening to you, though some of your injuries could be classified as moderately serious for a Terran. I do have you on rapid-heal, since there was no infection. Except for your broken bones, you should be

recovered in two weeks; those will take three to four."

Dana nodded, the reference to her broken bones bringing the casts on her arms to her attention, and she wondered again about their attackers. "How's my thakur? And what about the ones who attacked us?"

The doctor frowned. "Your thakur is fine, and wants to see you. I will permit that tomorrow morning; right now you still need to rest. As for your assailants, they are dead. Clan Torrance is particular about the safety of its guests, and the warrior Garvey caught them in the act. Two were kept alive long enough to question, and --" She broke off. "Garvey is an honorable man and would report what he was told accurately, but his prisoners might easily have lied to stop the interrogation."

Dana felt a sinking sensation. "What . . . what did they say?"

The doctor hesitated, clearly unwilling to tell her, but honesty was too deeply ingrained in Sandemans for her to avoid it. "They said your thakur's chief representative here had hired them to ambush you, do ... what they did, and worse, then leave you to die of your injuries and exposure."

Dana swallowed past the lump that had appeared in her throat. That fit in all too well with her earlier feeling that they hadn't just been criminals. One starting to call his leader what sounded like "Cap," their avoidance of names, the leader's expertise with the baton . . . "Were they carrying any ID?"

"No."

And that fit the theory she was starting to evolve, too. They sounded like a mercenary commando team -- but her thakur wouldn't do such a thing! He wouldn't set her up for a particularly unpleasant death . . . would he? Suddenly she wasn't sure. One of the less pleasant things she had done for him was to set up a -- well, not a frame, the man had been guilty -- but a trap for someone who had gotten in Jason's way. It had, indirectly, led to the man's death . . .

"I'm disturbing you," the doctor said. "And that is something you do not need. A tranquilizer, if you permit, would help."

Dana felt a brief flash of amusement at a doctor asking permission for a treatment -- but this was Sandeman, where medical treatment was kept as unintrusive and respectful as possible even with an unconscious patient, and never went beyond that permitted by a conscious one. She nodded. "I think I'd like that, Doctor. Thank you."

"None needed." The doctor went to a wall cabinet, prepared an injector, and used it, then left as her patient fell asleep again.

Dana didn't recognize the w'woman who was in her room the next time she woke, but she didn't have time to ask for an introduction; she saw her thakur sitting beside her bed, scanning a tape.

Monitors apparently alerted the w'woman; she turned to Jason. "Your 'na is waking, Mr. Jason. If you wish to speak to her alone, I can monitor from outside."

"You needn't bother, Nurse," Jason said, putting down the tape-viewer and standing to look down at Dana, his expression mildly regretful. "It's too bad we had to be rescued early, thakur-na. I did try to give you a heroic death; sorry it didn't work out."

"Thakur?" Dana didn't want to believe what she was hearing, even though she'd half-suspected it. "I don't understand. Have I done something wrong?"

"No, at least nothing you could help," Jason said calmly. "You've simply outlived your usefulness. I thought I owed you the satisfaction of a trip here, then the belief that you were dying to save me; you were worth that much effort. Still, the fact remains: I wish you to leave me. I no longer need you."

Dana was stunned by the cold finality in his voice. He knew what he was saying, too, what he was doing -- he was condemning her with an Imperial English paraphrase of the High War words that were a thakur's way of telling his 'na, "Thou hast dishonored me."

But maybe he didn't know exactly what that meant. "Thakur -- what am I supposed to do?"

Jason shrugged. "That's up to you. Whatever a Sandeman 'na does when ¥'s no use any more, I suppose. Mentally you've always been more Sandeman than Terran anyway . . . yes, that would be best. Imitate your Sandeman idols again." He started to turn away.

"Yes, Thakur." Dana went as cold as his voice had been, wishing she had died back in the mountains, never had to hear this.

"Mister Jason!" the w'woman snapped.

He turned back. "Yes? You don't approve?"

"I do not, but I cannot interfere between thakur and 'na. So long as you both live and she wears your mark, however, she is yours; no one else may be involved in what you order for her."

"Oh? All right." Jason took a folding knife from his pocket, opened it, and bent over his 'na.

Dana felt cold sharpness against her cheek, and she gasped. Then the knife bit, four quick shallow slashes, followed by a tugging, and she cried out more in loss than in pain. By the time the tugging stopped, she was sobbing quietly, the salt of her tears accenting the pain of her missing tattoo. When she was able to see again, Jason was gone and the w'woman was standing over her, cleaning her cheek.

Dana raised the head of her bed, trying to think. Her thakur -- her former thakur -- had admitted seeking her death, but he had that right; a 'na's gift of ¥self was absolute. She had even imagined circumstances where she would welcome death at his hands, or give him his own -- but those had been honorable circumstances, where death was preferable to the alternative. This was . . . She shied away from the thought momentarily, then forced herself back.

Her thakur had ordered her to die, in humiliation and agony, even as he had said she had done nothing to deserve such a death. Then he had told her to do whatever a Sandeman 'na would do under the same circumstances. And she had absorbed enough of their ways to think that a proper response -- except that, as far as she knew, similar circumstances had never arisen.

For the moment, at least, she was too stunned to be really afraid. She turned to the w'woman. "Lady -- can you help me?"

"Help you how?" the w'woman asked.

"To do what's needed -- except that I don't know what is needed!" She hesitated. "I mean . . . I've been dismissed, but he said I haven't done anything wrong!"

The w'woman shook her head slowly. "Nothing like this has ever happened before. All I can tell you is that custom says a 'na who has been dismissed must make atonement for allowing ¥'s thakur to accept one who

proved unworthy."

Dana was silent for a moment, absorbing that, then she nodded. In her misery, it didn't seem too unreasonable that she should have to die just for being of no further use. She had tried to live by Sandeman custom; she couldn't change that now, simply because it became . . . inconvenient. "You're right, of course. But I can't do it myself right now, and I don't have a clan-chief to help me."

The w'woman looked at her with what seemed to Dana like approval. "Perhaps a clan-chief can be found for you."

"I'd . . . appreciate that." Dana licked her lips, fear beginning to emerge from her stunned misery, but her mouth was so dry it was little help. "I should talk to them myself, I suppose -- at least if they'll talk to me -- but I can't dial the phone. Would you, please?"

The w'woman nodded. "What clan?"

"I don't think it matters that much," Dana said. "Alanna first, if I have to pick one. If their chief won't help, just keep going until we find one who will."

"A good choice." The w'woman dialed the bedside phone, obviously a familiar combination, then spoke to the warrior who answered in High War Speech. Dana could understand only an occasional word of that variant of Classical Russian, though she could read and write it fluently; all she could gather was that the w'woman was asking for the Alanna.

A few moments later, a man wearing the arms of Alanna's chief appeared on the screen, introducing himself as Killian. The w'woman started to speak, but before she'd said more than a few words, Killian frowned and interrupted with a question. She answered with a "Da, Glavniy," then there was a brief conversation Killian closed with a decisive statement. The w'woman stepped aside, and Dana found herself confronting the image of a stern-faced clan-chief.

He let her wait a few seconds, then spoke in Imperial English. "The lady Arden tells me that your thakur has dismissed you and that you require a clan-chief's aid to atone."

"Yes, Chief, to both." Dana turned her face so he could see the raw spot on her cheek, and raised her cast-enclosed arms. "As you can see."

"The lady Arden mentioned extenuating circumstances."

Dana hesitated, but she had spent so long trying to be Sandeman in all but body that her response was more by reflex than by thought. "I claim none, Alanna," she said formally. "Custom says none exist."

"True." Killian's expression became remote, almost frightening. "Very well, I accept the responsibility of acting for the clan-chief you do not have. Alanna warriors will be there as soon as I can contact ones nearby, and they will bring you to our clanhome. You will be treated as befits the oathbreaker your thakur's actions proclaim you; if you do not understand what that means, ask the lady Arden. I will see you in approximately six hours."

Six hours, Dana thought as Killian's image disappeared. That meant she might live seven or eight, depending on how badly the beating had weakened her.

"Do you understand?" Arden asked.

Dana turned to the w'woman, fear growing as her shock faded. "What's in the text-tapes, yes. Not the details of the . . . execution."

"Those can vary; they depend on the clan-chief." Arden looked almost sympathetic, Dana thought. "You know, then, that you will receive no more pain medication, that no one will speak to you unnecessarily, and that when your escort arrives you will be placed under restraint."

"Yes." The restraints were a formality, especially in her case -- a sign of condemnation, like the silent treatment -- but the lack of medication would have her uncomfortable, at least, even before the execution began.

"Chief Killian has granted one concession, since you were hurt before your thakur dismissed you. If you wish, I can give you a stimulant to compensate for your injuries."

Dana thought about that offer briefly before she spoke. "Let me try to stand and walk. I'll take the stimulant if I can't."

"Reasonable." Arden moved to help as Dana sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. That brought on a wave of dizziness, and when she cautiously slid off the bed, her knees gave way. Arden caught her and helped her back onto the bed.

"It looks like I'd better take it," Dana said shakily. She hadn't realized she was so weak -- it wouldn't do at all for her escort to have to carry her! "A strong dose, please."

"A twelve-hour dose, as strong as you can tolerate," Arden agreed. "Are you allergic to energine?"

"No, that'll be fine." Dana would have refused such a dose if she'd expected to have to go through the aftereffects; energine would keep you going through almost anything, but you paid the price later -- and she was also on rapid-heal, which made demands of its own. But both would be academic in a few hours. She watched Arden prepare an injector, her thoughts going to what would be happening to her shortly. She didn't know the details, no, but she was fully aware that it would be at least as painful as the attack -- and more humiliating, because she cared about the Sandemans' opinions as she hadn't about the attackers'.

Arden gave her the injection, then said, "It will take effect in a few minutes, and once it does, I will also have to start treating you as an oathbreaker. However, I told the Alanna that there was more to this than appears on the surface, and he has agreed to contact Torrance for the interrogation reports, then watch a copy of the monitor tapes from here that I will send with his warriors. That will probably have no effect, but this is an unprecedented situation; it could make a difference." She hesitated, then went on in a low voice. "I break custom by saying this, but I don't think you dishonored. I pray the gods will grant you a swift death, then rebirth as a warrior-caste Sandeman to you can earn a place in their ranks." Then she turned away, leaving the room before Dana could frame a reply.

As the energine took effect and her strength returned, Dana clung to Arden's words. They meant there was still a trace of hope for her . . . if Clan-chief Killian agreed with the lady Arden.

But that trace of hope wasn't all good; it was easier to hold fear at bay if you had no alternative to what you were afraid of. That trace of hope, tiny as it was, let the fear start to grow again. She began practicing one of the pre-combat calming exercises she'd come across in her studies of Sandeman, pleased to find that even with her lack of experience it helped.

The next time she tried to stand, she felt almost normal. She had no idea how long it would take the Alanna warriors to get to her -- she had no idea where she was, other than in a hospital -- so she decided she had

better get dressed.

Doing so replaced what fear her exercises had left with sheer frustration. To begin with, bandages made clothes that had fit comfortably before so snug they would have been hard to get into even if she'd had her hands free instead of in casts. As it was, the effort of just getting them on, not to mention closing the buttons and zippers she preferred to magseals, was more of a challenge than she appreciated right then.

Not too long after she managed to make herself presentable, four warriors wearing Alanna arms on their drab coveralls -- and more heavily armed than usual for peacetime -- entered her room. She bowed to them, acutely conscious of the scab forming on her cheek. They didn't return the courtesy, of course; instead, two of them secured her arms behind her back. They weren't especially gentle, but she was obscurely pleased that they also weren't as rough as she'd expected them to be with an oathbreaker.

And during the flight to the Alanna clanhome, she was both pleased and a little puzzled by the warriors' continuing lack of overt hostility. Even given the ingrained politeness of a Sandeman, she would have expected some jostling, or unpleasant comments.

The flight also gave her time, and energine gave her strength, to think back on the attack and Jason's dismissal of her. She still didn't want to believe that the man she'd chosen to devote her life to had set her up for such a painful, degrading death, even to give her the illusion of dying for the best reason a thakur-na could have. But she couldn't avoid the truth: from all the evidence she had, that was precisely what he had done. And then when that had failed, he had deliberately sentenced her to the death of an oathbreaker.

She shifted in her seat, trying to find a comfortable position with her arms fastened behind her. She failed, and that discomfort combined with the wearing off of the painkiller to make her begin to resent her former thakur. Maybe she did deserve to die, she thought bitterly. Not for the dishonor he admitted she wasn't guilty of, but for her misjudgment of him -- when it came down to first causes, that was why she was being flown to her death. While Jason would live, as wealthy, comfortable, and influential as ever . . .

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Dana wasn't able to appreciate either the crisp autumn weather or the functional beauty of Alanna's clanhome when the plane landed and her guards, their weapons drawn, escorted her into the warriors' hall. The mixture of fear about what was to come, anger at Jason, and the ache of her injuries had her irritable, wanting to get the whole mess over with so she wouldn't have to think about it any more.

Killian was waiting for her, sitting at the judicial-looking Chief's Bench at the far end of the hall. Some clans had theirs ornamented, to varying degrees, but Alanna's was plain: glossy jet-wood, the only color on it the arms of Alanna's chief.

Dana's heart sank as she realized that Killian was clad in leather as black as his Bench, again relieved only by his arms, rather than the usual warrior-drab. She hadn't known he'd earned that -- been acclaimed by his peers as having honor so uncompromising it couldn't be questioned. So much for the lady Arden's -- and her own -- hope of some clemency, Dana thought. Yet Arden must have known the Alanna was entitled to honor-black . . .

Urged forward by one of her guards, Dana approached the Bench and, before she could be prompted, knelt. A Sandeman knelt only to the gods and to @'s thakur, if @ had one, but this was a special case; Killian was acting on Jason's behalf, so she had to show him the same degree of respect. She heard a quiet sound of what seemed like approval from the warriors and w'women beginning to gather in the hall, but didn't dare let it reawaken her hopes.



She returned Killian's silent gaze. She would continue to abide by the customs she had tried so long to observe -- she still didn't see how she could change that now, whatever the circumstances -- but she had decided during the flight that she had done nothing to be ashamed of, and wouldn't act as if she had.

Killian nodded once, then accepted the tape her senior guard handed him and slipped it into a viewer in the Bench. Dana could hear only a murmur from the speaker as he played the tape, but she could see Killian's face clearly, and she had seldom seen such an expression of revulsion. Surely she hadn't done anything disgraceful enough to merit that!

When Killian looked up from the Bench screen, his face was set and grim enough to make Dana shiver. He looked at her steadily for several seconds, then rose and came around the Bench to stand in front of her, gesturing to one of the bystanders.

"Da, Glavniy?" the w'woman who approached said.

"Speak English," Killian said. "Contact the Miklos for me, please, and tell him that a serious question of custom has arisen that must be dealt with immediately. I would like him to call a conference of all available on-planet clan-chiefs as soon as possible, for that purpose."

"May I give him details?"

"Show him the tape I just watched; that will be more than enough."

"Yes, Chief." The w'woman went to the Bench and took the tape, then left.

"Please stand, Ms. Manfredi," Killian said, startling Dana -- and startling her even more when he took her shoulders and steadied her as she obeyed. "I regret that I must continue to observe the formalities of treating you as an oathbreaker for the moment; custom, as you have shown you understand, should not be broken easily. But I want you to know that I believe you acted honorably and should not have the kind of death he sentenced you to. I do not feel that honor would permit me to carry out that sentence."

Dana was as stunned as she had been when Jason spoke the formula of dismissal. "Chief -- "

He raised a hand to silence her. "What to do about your situation cannot be decided by a single clan-chief, even the chief of the First Clan. But I doubt that you -- or I -- will be left in suspense long, once the Miklos sees that tape and has called the conference I requested. It should be an hour, perhaps a little less, and in the meantime I will have you made as comfortable as your status permits." He nodded to the senior of her guards. "See to it, Bowie, and bring her to the com room as soon as the conference convenes."

\* \* \* Dana spent most of the next hour wondering what in Chaos was going on, even as she appreciated Killian's actions on her behalf and the way her guards managed to observe the letter of treating her as an oathbreaker while at the same time wordlessly letting her know they didn't think she could be, after Killian's endorsement.

Eventually they got word the conference was convening, and took her to Alanna's com room, where she recognized Miklos' arms on the screen. As far as she knew, the last time that communications-specialist clan had agreed to call an all-planet conference was just before Sandeman was brought into the Empire; it was difficult to believe she was the reason for calling another. But it was impossible to disbelieve, especially when the Miklos arms on the comscreen were replaced by Clan-chief Hurley's face.

"Thank you all for your time," the Miklos clan-chief said. "This conference was called at Alanna's request, concerning a situation for which no custom exists, and for which Miklos agrees that one must be established

quickly."

He paused, then gave the background: Jason and Dana's vacation and the Torrance interrogation reports, then he said, "The next part consists of monitor tapes from the Shangri-La Continental Medcenter. At this point, it still seemed that Jason's actions, peculiar as they were, might have had some justification."

With that, the picture changed to show a hospital room, its only patient a red-haired Terran woman. Dana recognized herself, wincing at what the Sandemans must think, but she remained silent.

The hospital room was replaced by Hurley's face again. "That took place this morning, medcenter time. Dana's situation has no precedent; only clan-chiefs can decide the proper way to deal with it, with her, and with Jason. Chiefs, Miklos awaits your responses."

As chief of the First Clan, Killian was entitled to speak first this morning, medcenter time. Dana's situation has no precedent; only clan-chiefs can decide the proper way to deal with it, with her, and with Jason. Chiefs, Miklos awaits your responses."

As chief of the First Clan, Killian was entitled to speak first; he used the coder combination that opened the conference for discussion.

"Killian of Alanna," Hurley recognized him.

"Is this 'cast going to the screen in Jason's suite?"

Hurley looked off-screen for a moment, then nodded. "It is. What is Alanna's word?"

"None, yet; first, Alanna wishes Vader's opinion of what we have all seen."

"As Alanna wishes. Donovan of Vader." Hurley recognized the chief of the first clan founded after Sandeman overthrew the Shapers, named for the figure in the Saga who had regained his and his family's honor by overthrowing his oppressor. The most delicate questions of honor were referred to Clan Vader, and their decisions were considered final. "What is Vader's word?"

"Vader says this." Donovan's face held grim determination. "Dana Manfredi has acted in full honor at all times. Although it has never happened, Vader says the proper procedure for a thakur to release a 'na without dishonor to either would be for the 'na's tattoo to be barred, exactly as if honorable service had been ended by the thakur's death. In attempting to have her killed, especially in the way he did, and then by dismissing her to seek the death of one who has hurt or dishonored his thakur, Jason has forfeited all claim to honor."

The two men in Jason's hotel suite looked at each other, and the head of Jason Interstellar's Sandeman operation said feelingly, "Oh, shit. That tears it, boss. We won't do a centi's worth of business here for a year."

"They'll get over it, Gunter. We'll make up the loss elsewhere, and you can keep things going until business picks up again here. I'll see to it that your pay doesn't suffer -- though you'll probably have to cut staffing for a while."

"I can live with that, I guess. Not that I'll have any choice."

Killian spoke again. "Alanna thanks Vader, and Alanna says this." He hoped Jason could read Sandeman expressions better than he could their way of thinking. Obviously he didn't realize that Miklos controlled two-way access to any set tuned in to a conference call, and that his conversation had been heard in all the clans. "There is precedent for a clan to give countenance to an off-worlder, and others have adopted our

customs; our Earl Klaes and his family even use the clan-prefixes offered them by Shona."

He paused, turning to Dana and smiling. "Dana Manfredi."

Dana was startled to hear herself addressed, but she responded quickly. "Yes, Chief Killian?"

"Will you accept Alanna's countenance?"

Would she accept the First Clan's countenance? Dana could feel tears welling up, though she managed to keep her voice under control. She had been rejected by her thakur, had a planet-wide conference called to discuss her fate, been commended by the arbiters of honor, and now offered membership in the First Clan! Thank the gods they didn't consider tears a sign of weakness . . . "I would be honored, Alanna."

"Good." Killian smiled at her, then sobered. "The Terran woman known as Dana Manfredi has accepted Alanna's countenance. Be it known that she is henceforth Dana, a clanswoman of Alanna. As chief of her clan I say her actions deserve not punishment but praise; the honorable service she gave was to one unworthy of it, and he had no right to order her death. It is my personal belief that Dana merits the black and a place in the warrior caste, but that decision is not mine alone.

"It is my decision, however, that Clan Alanna take appropriate action against Richard Jason and every thing or person associated with him. To that end, I claim Chief's Right on behalf of my clanswoman Dana." He paused, and when he spoke again, it was to one man.

"Jason. That means that anything of yours on Alanna property will be destroyed, anyone who serves you will be killed unless they renounce that service, and your life is forfeit if you enter Alanna territory. I find myself hoping you do; I would enjoy making you suffer the fate you ordered her to seek."

After a brief interval, Hurley began recognizing other clan-chiefs. "Odell of Leras."

"Leras agrees that Alanna's clanswoman Dana should wear black. Leras also concurs and will cooperate with Alanna in other respects; Jason is currently in Leras territory, and as an off-worlder, we must give him time to leave. But his property will be destroyed, and should he remain here after one standard day, he will be delivered to Alanna for Chief's Right."

"Shona concurs and will cooperate."

"Lewies concurs and will cooperate."

"Vader concurs and will cooperate."

\* \* \*

"Miklos concurs and will cooperate."

As the litany came to an end, Dana realized Killian -- her clan-chief! -- was behind her, releasing the restraints and easing her arms into a more comfortable position. "Welcome to Alanna, lady," he said gently, removing the heavy woolen cloak that was part of his ceremonial black garb and draping it around her shoulders. "The true oathbreaker will do no more business in this sector, or in any where honor is more valuable than greed, even if he manages to get offworld. You should be starting to feel the aftereffects of the energine, so Meara, our senior w'woman, will care for you until you wake -- and when you are recovered enough, we will have a party to welcome you into Alanna, the warrior caste, and the ranks of those who wear honor-black." He smiled, and Dana could almost feel the lightening of the clan's mood. "You have done something as

unprecedented as what was done to you, did you know that?"

Dana's strength was ebbing as the engine wore off, and she wasn't quite sure what her clan-chief meant. "I'm sorry?"

Killian laughed aloud. "Why doesn't that surprise me? Dana, you do need rest now -- but try to remember you were able to force a change in one of our most sacred customs by strict adherence to that same custom!"

END

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