

GUDANNA: WHAT IS SAID

The map, drawn by long-dead hands in some isolated monastery, was jostled by the head that landed on it and ruined in a spray of blood. The head, eyes goggling at its predicament, once brown, was now blue black. The blood a perfect, bright red.

All at the table recognized the head. It was Tamras, the Durani ambassador. A fat, jovial man who peppered his conversation with constant praise that said, "I know this is your land, but never forget that I represent the largest army in the world."

On one end of the table was Samdat, the Speaker of the Law, the dead Khan's most trusted advisor.

Nandanna, the dead Khan's daughter, flung the head from the other end of the table. She smiled, unevenly, and wiped her glove on a nearby merchant lord, ruining his silks with one, long, bored swipe of blood and gore. The man squealed in fear and stepped out of her way.

"I see I have the attention of court." Nandanna pulled her sword as the men at the table all took a step back. "I demanded writs of fealty from all here, and received only four. Must it come to this? Where is your loyalty to my father!" Nandanna's eyes marked each man, one by one. None returned her gaze, not even those who had already sworn their fate to hers. There were other heirs, for certain, but few that could match her abilities.

"Just as I predicted, the Durani pigs have taken advantage of my father's death to attack our lands. They think we're weakened. I will show them that we are not. I demand the crown!"

"This is not the law," Samdat said, his voice low and far away. "While we are at war, there can be no ascension to the Saddle Throne."

"Then I demand troops! I shall behead their Emperor Hamazi and piss in the hole, just as I opened his lying ambassador like a spring hog!"

"My princess, it is too late, the troops have left the city," Samdat replied.

Nandanna's rage overcame her, but only for an instant.

"Where have they gone?"

"To Aram at the fork."

"On whose authority!?"

The sound of a man clearing his throat in the dark, beyond the lamps made all eyes turn. Rudatha, Nandanna's toad-like brother, stepped from a curtained alcove behind Samdat. His talcum covered hand gestured to the exit, gracefully. The remainder of the court filed out and the siblings were alone.

"Father would have met the Durani and turned them back!" Nandanna was puzzled by her brother's eerie confidence. "Do you have nothing to say? Are you in league with Hamazi the soft? The master of trinkets? It has always been so with you. You know nothing of father's ways of war! He taught me to—"

Her voice froze when Rudatha cut her off with a wave of his pink, fat hand. He was called the Spider Prince, because everyone knew that his web of spies stretched from one end of the Dominion to the other, and beyond; few secrets ever eluded him. His presence made even the stoutest souls noticeably uncomfortable. As Rudatha emerged, even Nandanna had to draw upon her deep reservoirs of courage just to meet his gaze.

She hated him for that.



"I offer you a word of advice, my sister, because I love you as I loved our father." His voice was sprite-like and young beyond its years. "Rule is what lies between what is said and what is understood." The Spider was pleased with himself, she knew; gloating. He developed the habit as a child at court. Giggling. Watching. It was his weakness.

Recovering her nerve, Nandanna turned and smiled. She was pleased to watch him jump and catch that momentary glimpse of uncertainty on his face. The Spider stank of perfume and his face was caught

between grin and grimace as Nandanna approached. Looking down on him, she seized his shoulders in her hands, she felt his muscles tense to react but then go soft in submission. He was so weak.

"I would offer my own advice, brother. It is something father used to say when talking about you: even clever monkeys fall from trees." Nandanna squeezed him then, hard, until his breath caught, lifting his feet off the ground for a moment; then she released him. "Consider that while I go now, to Aram, to take command of our forces. Wish us luck, brother." She dropped him and closed the door behind her as she left.

The Spider stood, alone, smiling in the dark. "That's it, my sister; be a good girl and rush off to claim your prize."