

PASSING STRANGERS

WRITTEN BY SEAN FISK

EDITED BY JEFFREY MEYER

The Second City

Sadhu Dalai was a simple man, who lived by a simple philosophy: Whatever trials may come, they will be weathered. It was a lesson that his mother, Nila, whose words he honored above all else, had taught him as a child. Growing up in a land ravaged by the cultists of Kali-ma had been a trial, but through it all, his mother would be there on the streets, pushing her cart and selling fresh-baked bread to the people of the city. When Sadhu was old enough, he would run beside the cart, crying their wares at the top of his lungs, and the hungry people would flock to them.

The cart was a thing of beauty. The aged, ancient wood had the sheen of being newly polished, despite the dust that always threatened to dull it. The sounds it made were a wonder, the creaking of the wheels on the stone and clay streets heralding their coming almost as much as the joyous cries of its small herald. The handles were wrapped in a colorful red-brown leather, the wood itself long worn too smooth for gripping. The surface on which their goods were piled, great stacks of rounds and teetering bowls of sauce, was dyed haphazardly from generations of spills, the wood itself lightly infused with the fragrance of a hundred savory spices. The roof of the cart, the tiles hand-crafted and oft-replaced, was at all times alive with vibrant colors. Simple strips of scrap fabric, with a bit of artful persuasion, became fabulous streamers, netting, flags. Interspersed between the joyous banners were all matter of chimes and bells, singing the tune of the wind out to all who had ears to hear it. Taken as a whole, the cart was an heirloom, an artifact, a joy to the senses, and the center of their family business.

It was a good life, if not a terribly profitable one. On weeks when sales were poor, they would eat thin broth and the hardened, unsold loaves in order to have the coin to buy the next weeks' flour. When times were prosperous, much of the coin they made would be spent on sweetening the bread they made, or on the thick, flavorful sauces their customers loved so. Yet, he never questioned his mother. While their friends and neighbors paid for bread with metal coins, their real wages were in the smiles their passing brought, the joy of those who broke their fast with them. No one could say anything bad of the Dalais, nor would any want to.

Their pains did not go unrewarded. When their neighbors prospered, so did they. They bought more bread, invited Nila and her son to their homes for meals, and waved cheerily to see the family cart go by. When Nila was sick, they would give Sadhu medicines and soups to bring to his mother, and volunteered to help push the cart. The baked goods they sold seemed to reflect the joy, simple though they were. In lean times, they sold earthy, thick bread, a solid meal in and of itself. When they could afford it, the cart overflowed with sugar and cinnamon, spiced curries and roast lamb. No matter what they sold, the people of the city would come, taking a respite from the heat of the day to eat, talk, and celebrate another day in the land of Ivory.

Trials came, to be certain, but Nila never stopped smiling, and so neither did Sadhu. When the cultists burned their home, they moved in with their neighbors, and Nila helped teach their children to read. In the famine left in their wake, they learned how to farm, to garden. When the strangers from Rokugan had arrived, they had been among the first to greet them, to learn their strange tongue.

In the years that followed, it got harder and harder to smile. The strangers became rulers, and quite pitiless ones at that. To be certain, some were kinder than others, but it was far too easy to see them all through the lens of the sorrows they brought. They came first as explorers, then conquerors, then their strange gods came with them to wreak havoc. An illness of the mind spread, and the Dalais were forced to flee their own city, staying on the edges of the jungle and waiting the crisis out far from the mad. Yet that was not the end of it, as after they returned to their ruined homes, the purges began.

Nila lost her life defending their long-time neighbors from their accusatory persecutors, but as she lay dying she told her son to always smile, for trials were made to be overcome.

And so Sadhu did. He smiled, and his smiles helped his new neighbors forget their troubles for a time. He would push his cart, hawking his wares, and the people would come. Some to eat, some to talk, some to laugh, but all would come. Sadhu's smile brought them comfort, if only for a little while. When the strangers started fighting in the streets, Sadhu led the children away from the spectacle. When the strangers began destroying their temples, Sadhu led his friends in prayer when they stopped by for their daily bread. It was only when the Naga came that he forgot how to smile entirely for a time. His cart and oven both were lost in the invasion, and though his neighbors helped him back to his feet in the aftermath, his universe had cracked one too many times.

The new oven was better than the one he had used previously, and far cleaner. The cart that his friends had helped him build creaked far less, and was more structurally sound than the old one. The bread he baked burned less often, for the heat of the stones was more even than in years past. His friends and neighbors bought bread with more frequency, for the unspoken reason that they knew he needed the coin far more than them. All these things were a blessing, but they felt to Sadhu like they were someone else's blessings.

The cart was an efficient, proper bit of woodwork, but it was not the family cart. That was lost to him forever. The oven was as a master's forge, wherein delicious repasts might be cooked, but it was not the family oven. Their home, which had survived so much, was now rubble. The neighbors showed true compassion in their patronage, and no fault could be found with their help, yet still Sadhu could not quiet the dark, nagging thoughts that saw only pity in their actions.

So it was that the family mantra became less of a comfort, and more of a drive to get through yet another day. Sadhu would push his cart down the street, the oiled wheels making no noise, the wood polished and unadorned. He would curl the edges of his mouth to feign happiness, and make idle chatter with his customers, but his sorrow would mask any change in his tired eyes. In the evening, he would take whatever meager profits he had made and buy tomorrow's grain, readying the oven for baking in the morning before he drifted into exhausted slumber.

Today was no different. Ever since the Mantis-wearing strangers had taken control of the city, much of his conversations had consisted of worried mutterings about the price of cloth, of theft and piracy, of the foolish crusades that changes of regime always brought with them. Some who thought themselves wiser than most scoffed at the doomsayers, saying that the affairs of the samurai from Rokugan would not reach the small communities of the Peasant District, that they had worries of their own to deal with in the distant East. Others still made mention that the green-clad ones generally brought good trade with them, and unlike some of their fellows, were more often inclined

to deal fairly with the Ivindi. For his own part, Sadhu simply nodded and offered affirmatives with his not-smile. To actually care about the issues was simply too tiring.

He pushed his cart along one of the last lanes, waving to a departing customer. The day was beginning to wane, the relatively cool air indicating an evening that would be a respite from the punishing heat of the spring day. He swiped a hand across his brow, the sweat he rid himself of a testament to the day's work. His thoughts turned to home, where there was an oven to be stoked and a straw mattress that might offer some temporary respite from the tedium of existence. The thoughts distracted him, almost to the point that he did not notice that he was being hailed in halting Ivindi.

"Excuse, you are the bread man?"

The voice drew his attention to the side of the road, where a small, old woman sat on a stool. Small seemed to be an appropriate word to describe her. She was clearly Rokugani, which did no favors for her stature, and though she seemed fit enough, the slight slackness of her skin gave the suggestion of muscles long unused. The hood over her head concealed much of her face, though her lips were visible, and betrayed no quaver. Any uncertainty of speech was the result of unfamiliarity with the language rather than any frailty. Nonetheless, the cane that sat across her lap spoke to at least some effects of advanced age.

"That I am, grandmother," Sadhu said, dropping smoothly into his 'friendly neighbor' voice. "Would you like to buy something?"

"Do you have any..." The woman seemed to struggle with the words, finally giving up and saying something in Rokugani that Sadhu did not recognize. While his mother had been the true master of all tongues, he had let his skill with the language lapse with her passing.

"I'm sorry grandmother, but I do not understand... Is there, perhaps, someone you are with?"

The old woman shook her head, confused, as though she did not understand the question. She rattled off a string of other phrases in her language, but Sadhu could only shake his head in response, sighing internally.

"Oba-sama!" A voice called from down the street. Sadhu looked to see a young man running to join them. From his frame, he seemed to be in his mid twenties, with the soft, handsome features of a man that hardly noticed that he was aging. His clothes were of a colonial fashion, but made from a deep orange silk that seemed to catch the last of the evening sun's rays and send them dancing across the fabric. He rushed up, practically skidding as he came to a stop, and gave a deep bow to Sadhu.

"My apologies," he said in perfect, unaccented Ivindi. "My Champi... that is, my grandmother has just recently come to these lands, and has yet to master the language. I hope she has not given you too much trouble?"

"Not at all, honorable samurai," Sadhu replied, the word 'samurai' clashing horribly with his native tongue. "She asked me for something, but I am afraid I do not understand her."

“Of course, a moment please,” the man said, bowing again. He turned to the woman and launched into a rapid-fire exchange, of which Sadhu only caught a few words. The young man’s name was apparently Shunryu, and he used grandmother as a term of respect rather than an indication of relation. A few moments was all it took, at which point Shunryu turned back to Sadhu. “She would like to know if you have any bread baked with cinnamon.”

“Ah! You are in luck, “ Sadhu said, pulling forth a particular round of spice-bread. “I had sold all but the last of them, you are welcome to the final loaf of it.”

“Thank you,” Shunryu replied, a friendly expression on his face. “Will this be enough?” He offered a coin, which Sadhu accepted without thought. He was about to affirm the price, when the old woman spoke again in Rokugani. Shunryu paused, listening to her, and rummaged in his sleeves. He drew forth a small set of chimes, which he handed to Sadhu. “Honored grandmother would like you to have these as well. For the cart, as a gift for stopping for an old blind woman.”

“Thank you, honored samurai,” Sadhu said, taking the chimes. He placed them almost automatically on one of the many small hooks of the new cart, and absent-mindedly ran his fingers through them as he drew his hand back. The light ringing sound was a small comfort to him, almost a reminder of the cart that he had lost.

“This is... well,.” The old woman said, struggling somewhat with the foreign words of the Ivindi tongue.

“I agree,” Shunryu added with a nod. “They suit it. And,” he placed a hand upon the cart, suddenly looking very distant, and spoke softly in an unusual voice. “She would be very proud.”

Sadhu looked at him dumbfoundedly, but Shunryu simply removed his hand, shaking his head as if to clear some fog. He then smiled and turned, leading the old woman further down the road so that they might find a quiet place to enjoy the sunset and their bread. Sadhu watched them go, and when they turned a corner and vanished from sight, gave a small laugh over the strange encounter. He checked the cart and the chimes upon it, confirming that he had not dreamed the whole thing.

The chimes were real enough, and they sang lightly as he once again made his way home. This time, however, the faintest hint of his smile reached his eyes.

The Jewel of the Desert

“That, in essence, is the problem with you samurai,” the sahir said, rubbing her temples as she leaned forward on the bench of the audience chamber. “You speak as petulant children, full of fire, of certainty that you know everything. You refuse to hear anything that does not fit within your lauded worldview.”

“Apologies, great one, but this is not simply a matter of viewpoint,” Ide Maan offered. “The Heavens themselves have distanced themselves from our world, and the coming storm will surely reach beyond the borders of Rokugan if it is not stopped. We ask not only for aid in our fight to save our Empire, but in the fight to save all of the world.”

“Rokugan is not the center of the world, no matter how you wish it to be so, and any apocalypse you have unleashed will merely be the end of yourselves. The sun will rise and set as it has every day before, regardless of whether or not your Empire has been destroyed.”

“But, certainly you must have noticed the signs,” Maan protested. “The distancing of the Celestial Realms has been heralded by days where the moon has blotted out the sun, by earthquakes, by the rising of malevolent creatures...”

“You are missing the point, Unicorn,” the sorcerer interrupted, waving a hand bearing many jeweled rings in dismissal. “There has not been an eclipse for a generation. Save for the rumble of armies, the Sands are still. If any beasts of your Shadowlands have come here, they have been put down without a noteworthy battle, or the desert has done for them what steel did not.”

Maan moved to speak again, but quickly deflated as the implications of the sahir’s words sunk in. *If the rest of the world is not being affected, then what does this mean? Has Rokugan itself truly given such offense that we have been singled out?*

Maan was still collecting his thoughts when a voice piped up from behind him. “Interesting that the Sands have not been affected. The Colonies, that is, the former Ivory Kingdoms, are isolated from the Empire, yet the signs have been seen there. Could, perhaps, population be a determining factor?”

Maan prayed silently to the Fortunes to give him the strength to avoid rounding on his colleague and shushing him. His prayers, however, seemed to be without cause, as the sahir looked up with interest for the first time in the audience.

“Ah, a voice of reason. Perhaps now we can get somewhere. You speak as an Iuchi, do you not?”

“Yes, my name is Iuchi Kwaida.”

“Honored greetings, Kwaida,” the sahir said, sitting up fully in her chair. Her voice lost the bored air that it had held from the start, becoming more interested as she talked with a colleague. “The phenomenon you speak of, have they only been observed in the cities of the samurai? It is my understanding that much of the land in the Kingdoms is still populated primarily by the native people.”

“We share this understanding then,” Kwaida responded, stepping up beside Maan. “Although we have not heard from those areas in particular. It would be worth investigating, in any case.”

“Investigations,” Maan interjected, eager to get the conversation back on track. “That we would be grateful for your aid in...”

“Enough,” The sahir said, scything her bejeweled hand through the air once more. Her tone, thoughtful when speaking to the shugenja, turned instantly condescending when addressing the Ide. “The Qabal thanks you for your gifts, emissary. You do honor to your house and ours. Now, this one desires to speak further with the emissary from house Iuchi, and as such your services are no longer required.”

“Of course, your eminence,” Maan said, sweeping his robe in a deep bow. Though he knew a losing battle when he saw one, he still took the liberty of tossing his colleague a look of *Don't mess this up* before he and the rest of the delegation exited the ornate doors to the marble corridor. There, the delegates fell to talking among themselves, those who did not speak the native language hurriedly asking what had been said, while those who did tried to explain it to them without context.

“Don't worry about that overmuch,” a voice advised in thickly accented Mekhen. “The Qabal never were overly fond of treating with those without magical gifts. Your man should do fine now that he has their ear.”

Maan turned to regard a figure wrapped in black cloth, practically from head to foot. His face was concealed almost entirely with a face-wrap and turban, the kind one would expect to see worn by a desert traveler, and what little did show of his face was just a few shades lighter than the skin tone of those native to the city.

“Peace, friend,” the figure said, raising his hands to show he was unarmed. Maan loosened his grip on the hilt of his blade, almost unaware of the fact that he had gripped it in surprise at being addressed. “I did not mean to startle you. I was among the general throng in the audience chamber when you entered, and thought I might ask if you could spare a word or two.”

“I certainly might,” Maan assented, gesturing behind him to set the yojimbo at ease. He did not need to see them to know that, if he had been startled enough to go for his sword, there were several swords already drawn in his defense. Sure enough, his next words carried across the hall on a background of steel hissing back into scabbards. “If I knew whom I would be sparing them for.”

“That is simple enough,” the man said, with a bow so theatrical it almost came off as flippant. “I am Shen-Lao, and I represent a party that was most interested in hearing of your group's' arrival in our beloved city. I have been sent, in classic Ide fashion, to extend the hand of friendship.”

“You know of our methods,” Maan noted, not entirely without approval.

“Your reputation precedes you,” Shen-Lao replied, the cloth at the corners of his mouth curling in the suggestion of a grin.

“Yet, you still have me at a disadvantage,” Maan pressed. “I would know the party that you represent. If our coming interests them, then perhaps we might work together towards a common goal.”

“A sentiment oft echoed in regards to those I represent,” Shen-Lao evaded. “The hand of friendship we extend comes with an invitation to a feast. Seek out the house that once was the property of the merchant Asim. There, all will be revealed.” Before anything else could be said, the enigmatic man casually strolled down the hallway, past lines of dumbfounded courtiers, to make his exit out the filigreed metal doors of the Academy. In his wake, the murmurs and gossip redoubled, wild theories being tossed back and forth as every member of the delegation offered their own theory as to the mysterious group that Shen-Lao represented, and those without mastery of Mekhen once again pestered their fellows for an explanation of what just transpired.

Sometime later, once the chaos had quieted somewhat, the doors to the audience chamber opened once more, and Kwaida emerged to join his fellows. Maan, waiting for him on the threshold, wasted no time in confronting his colleague.

“Well?” He inquired.

“They will be sending an expeditionary force back with us, to aid in researching the phenomenon at the very least,” Kwaida stated matter-of-factly. “Their role beyond that is currently being hotly debated. There seems to be an ideological split over how interventionist the Qabal should be in foreign matters, but I think it likely that they will decide to aid our fight. Those against held prominent seats, but those in favor were numerous enough to overwhelm the elder voices of the council.”

“Well done, well done indeed,” Maan congratulated him happily. “It seems funny though, that you secured the support of so many while speaking only to the one.”

“They were no doubt listening in,” Kwaida replied with a shrug. “The Qabal have learned things about magic that even the Isawa do not know. Different magic, to be sure, but their studies are quite in-depth.”

“Well, whatever the case, it is good to hear that our efforts were not in vain.”

“Oh,” Kwaida said, his even, analytical tone breaking for just a moment. “There was something else. It might interest you to know that the Scorpion are also in the city. Likely the ‘traitors’ that Bayushi Nitoshi so publically announced.”

“The Scorpion you say...” Maan mused, the pieces falling into place.

“Indeed. Now, the Qabal will likely be debating for the remainder of the evening. Shall we retire to our camp?”

“You go ahead,” Maan said absent-mindedly. “Take the rest of the delegation with you. Fortunes know they’ll have enough to talk about.”

“And yourself?”

“I have a feast to attend. Tell me, do you know where might I find the house of a merchant named Asim?”

A Dojo

“Heron Spears the Trout!” The sensei demanded, lunging at his pupil as he did. She obligingly moved into the requested form, striking down with the heel of her hand. The sensei caught her strike with his open palm and used the leverage to throw them apart once more.

“Good,” he roared, not pausing his assault. “Carp Becomes Dragon!” Once more, the pupil responded almost instantly, lashing out in a rising strike to intercept the monstrosly large man’s charge. He pulled up just short of her strike, and lashed out with his foot.

“Mantis Crushes the Leaf!” This time, the young girl hesitated, the less-practiced form coming less easily to her. The momentary lapse cost her a resounding kick across the ribs, sending her sprawling.

“Not good enough! Mantis Crushes the Leaf!” The sensei did not slow his assault, kicking once more. The pupil managed to regain her feet in time, and acted with enough speed to catch and redirect the kick.

“Better! Thousand-fold Palm!” The pupil reached out, throwing the full weight of her tiny frame into a solar-plexus strike. However, instead of making contact for a devastating attack, her lunge connected with nothing but air. Shortly thereafter, she became airborne as her sensei’s shoulder slammed into her at the moment of her overreach, tossing her unprepared body across the arena to smash into a support pillar.

“If you can still stand, you can still fight,” the huge man said, stopping his attack for the moment. “Can you stand?”

The girl gave a weak moan, and rolled onto her belly, hissing in pain as she did so. “I can stand,” she spat, the taste of blood in her mouth. She pushed herself back to her feet, wavering slightly before regaining her balance.

“Pfah,” the sensei mocked. “You cannot fight. You can barely fake standing. Sit down.” “I can stand!” the girl insisted, lashing out with a wild punch. Her master easily caught it, redirecting her back to the mat of the dojo.

“You will sit. Now is the time to learn, not to fight. Now tell me. What did you do wrong?”

The girl pushed herself off the floor, wiping dust from her face. “Nothing.”

“Nothing, hmm?” The sensei’s voice carried an amused tone that only grated further at the girl’s temper. “How is it then that you were flung across the room?”

“You cheated!”

“How did I cheat?”

“You said Thousand-fold Palm! I did it, but you didn’t accept it. You did something else entirely. You lied, and that’s cheating!”

“I only lied with my words. If you had watched my form, you would see the truth I was telling. Horse Stance, to stop the charge by rooting yourself. Walking with Water, to flow out of the way. Or, to believe the lie of words, and be struck.”

“It’s still not fair!”

“Fair?” The sensei chuckled outright at this. “No fight is fair. You win only if you are superior. Superior training. Superior strength. Superior numbers. Superior reflexes. Superior luck. If you would only fight when the odds are even, then retire now. Such mentality will bring only defeat.”

“How am I supposed to become superior if all you do is teach me the same forms everyone else learns?”

“By cheating.”

“What?”

“No fight is truly fair. If two combatants are evenly matched then the superior fighter will win. Yet, if they are evenly matched, which is the superior fighter? Simply put, the one who cheats better.”

The student was quiet for a time, mulling over the sensei’s words. Finally she looked up, and with the inquisitive voice of a child, she asked, “How do you cheat, master?”

The sensei smiled a warm grin. “Well, I am older than you. I have more experience in fighting. I have more reach than you, and I am far stronger...”

“No,” the child interrupted. “I mean how do you cheat in an otherwise fair fight?”

“Ah,” the sensei replied, his smile growing from a simple grin to a shark’s rictus, his mouth stretching to show an inhuman number of jagged teeth. “That depends entirely on who I need to defeat. I have many weapons at my disposal.”

“So, if you were to fight Master Sora, you would use a weapon?”

“HAH!” the sensei roared, slapping his leg. “No, I think not. A lesson. Any weapon you bring to a fight is your enemy’s weapon if they are skilled enough to take it from you. No, indeed, I would not bring a weapon against Sora.”

“Then what about the Taint?”

This time, it was the sensei’s turn to grow quiet. His many-fanged grin faded, the scissor-like teeth seeming to fold back into his mouth as his slight frown returned his face to human proportions. Finally, he found the words he was looking for, and quietly spoke. “The Taint is the weapon of a fool. It is a sword that you grasp by the blade and think yourself the wielder. To be sure, it is powerful. But the cost... Any victories brought to you by the Taint are not your own. Simple pleasures become hollow. Meaning is lost in things you once held sacred. All that matters is the next fight, so it becomes your reason for existing, even knowing that it will not satisfy. No, the Taint is not a tool of a superior warrior. Rather, inferior warriors are the tools of the Taint. And there are many, many inferior warriors...”

The sensei did not speak for some time, but brooded darkly. The student, uncertain of what to say, searched for words of her own. Finally she piped up, "I don't think you are inferior, sensei."

The beast of a man chuckled again, though entirely without mirth. "Perhaps not as I once was, but that is only by the grace of your master's teachings. The mastery of self he has taught freed my mind of my failings, but the physical scars remain. It is a good thing, I think. They remind me of my mistakes, so that I may not make the same mistake twice. Treasure your scars, pupil. There are few enough lessons in this world that you can survive once. A scar is proof that the world has not managed to kill you yet."

The pupil thought it over and nodded to herself. "That is why all the masters have so many scars. Because they have survived."

"Just so," the sensei said with a small grin.

"When I rule the Empire, I will not cover my scars. I will display them proudly!"

"Rule the Empire?" the sensei said, his extra teeth again showing in his smile. He reached out and shoved hard, sending his pupil sprawling. "You have yet to even master yourself. How can you hope to master Rokugan?"

"It is my birthright," the pupil complained, picking herself up off the ground. "I deserve..."

"You deserve nothing," the sensei said, drawing himself up to his full height. "You have the right to nothing. You will come to understand that you only truly own that which you can take and hold yourself. We have rested long enough, if you have started getting such foolish notions. Now, Thousand-fold Palm!"

"Hai!" Shouted the pupil, and this time, she was ready when the sensei rushed her. She Walked with Water, and planted a firm blow between her sensei's shoulder blades, to a roar of approval.