Sacaran Nights

Foreword to the Catalogue of Decay

*In all the strange places I have travelled, none have festered inside me like Sacara. The air was dank, pervaded by a persistent stench that churned my stomach until the contents crept up my throat. Somehow, the residents were as inured to the bile-inducing tang as they were to the city’s constant night, but I still wonder if my visit was a sacrifice worth making.*

*I never finished what I went there to do and catalogue the wealth of fungal species in Sacara. I was forced to abandon my attempts, having found that — like so much in Sacara— the knowledge once to be garnered had decayed away long ago. I flatter myself that even incomplete, this is still the most extensive account ever created. I challenge any other to survive Sacara long enough to do better. Few have tried. Fewer still have walked down the path leading into the city, holding their breath for as long as they can, trying not to inhale the poisonous ash cloud as its gritty dust scours their face.*

*I doubt it would require much skill to sum up all those who made it through the ash and emerged into the city, their number being so pitiful. To speak of Sacara elsewhere is to elicit confused frowns. Few believe the description of the brilliant blue lighting the streets, or the turmoil of colours in the putrefaction field beyond. I myself stared in wonder at the night cloaking the city, fascinated by the way it almost absorbed the light like a greedy god feasting on all Sacara had to offer. The ash cloud blocked the light from the sun, concealing daylight except for the merest of wispy rays quickly consumed by the roiling smog, the effect so complete that you would think the day must have prematurely given way to night.*

*I had barely stepped foot into Sacara before I wished for my stay to be over. I missed the sun’s embrace and so much more, but I endured it all to create this record. I do not consider it’s incompleteness a failure. To fail would mean there was once a chance of success, but when it comes to my visit to Sacara, I am only glad I survived.*

*- Lucan Denvard, author of Legacies of the Fallen, The Book of Thread and The Ungilded Lands.*



Upper Sacaran aetiology: FALLEN STARS. Named after the stars in the sky, which Sacarans only know of through the stories of visiting traders.

Lower Sacaran aetiology: GLOWERS. No records found.

*A bio-luminescent fungus that emits a blue-tinged light. Sacarans use it to illuminate their city in the place of fire, which consumes wood too rapidly for so expensive an import.*

ONE

It had only been a week since my father’s death, but already I was failing him. What a scolding he would give me the next time we spoke.

Why had I come here? The shame it would bring my line if anyone realised that the son of Galenn was hanging about in a tavern, and on the very turn before his father’s funeral no less, would be immense to say the least. I didn’t deserve the good fortune death had granted me.

No more. This would be the end of it. It had to be. The dream was one I should have let die with my brother sixteen years ago, instead of letting it drag me back here once again.

Keeping my head down and avoiding the gazes of those I passed, I made my way through the room, moving to the empty table at the back. People cast the odd sideways glance at the gand feathers embroidered about my cuffs, and the general newness of my outfit, since it was in far better condition than any of theirs despite my efforts to dress down. Other than their attention to my clothes though, those I passed ignored me much as they usually did, which was hardly surprising. Those who lived in this part of Sacara had enough troubles of their own to keep them busy. They didn’t have time to concern themselves with mine too.

The tavern door swung open as I sat and I glanced up to see if Belion had arrived, thrumming my fingers on the table top when I realised it wasn’t him. Even with only a handful of fallen star lanterns lighting the place, it was still easy to tell from the deathmask hiding the top half of the man’s face that he was Sacaran. Plus his skin was too dark for him to be a trader.

“There you are, Dagner.”

Belion’s travel-hardened figure loomed into view across the table from me. He slung his pack to the floor, cracking his neck as he settled on the other chair, his head scarf as much at odds with our fashions as ever. Although traders were generally a tough lot, roughened by their years spent travelling the world beyond, Belion was one of the most graceless specimens I had ever come across. The large portion of the year he spent travelling alone without the judgement of others to remind him how to behave was probably to blame.

Sniffing loudly, Belion cracked his neck before glancing about the tavern in distaste, his gaze narrowing as he stared at the bottles behind the bar. He made the face I was waiting for, the one that was part longing, part loathing as he stared at the liquor.

“Want me to order you something?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Rot got to your brain? Won’t catch me touching a drop of that piss. Don’t know why you lot even bother making it,” he said, glaring at the bottles behind the bar as if they were a collection of poisons rather than some of the most popular beverages Sacara had to offer.

“When did your supply run out this time?” I asked, leaning back in my seat and folding my hands on my lap.

“Not three quarters of the way,” Belion muttered with a grumble. “Got stuck in a desert storm. Had to take shelter for a week.”

“How long were you sober for?”

“Five miserable days. Longest of my life.”

Days. My ears sang as they always did whenever he said that word. The very notion of a day in Sacara was like a half-forgotten dream, one that I knew could never be. How could you have days when there was no daylight to break up the night?

“If you dislike it here so much,” I asked, watching Belion as he pressed his thumb to one nostril, then snorted through the other, “then why do you keep coming back?”

If he stopped returning, would giving up on my dream of carving out a legacy for myself be any easier? Probably not. Belion was the biggest exporter of putrefaction from Sacara, but he was far from the only one. There were plenty of others I could employ in his stead. Addictions were pervasive like that.

“Money’s good,” Belion said, rooting around in his pocket. “Enough to buy cotton for plugging my nose to the stench while I’m down here. At least for a few days.”

“Glad to hear it. It would have to be to keep you from your family for six months at a time.”

“Yeah well… The wife’s pregnant again, isn’t she,” he said with a grimace.

“Isn’t that a cause for congratulations?”

“I’m home twice a year and each time for no more than a couple of weeks, but she pops another one each year without fail. It’s enough to make you wonder.”

“Fair point,” I said with a chuckle, astonished by the way Belion was talking about what was one of the highest offences committable in Sacara.

“How about you anyway? I’d ask if anything’s changed, but nothing ever seems to stay the same in these parts. Think you’ve got a handle on things, then the rot crumbles in out from under you.”

“My father died this week,” I said quietly. “Is that change enough?”

“Oh. Well… Sorry to hear it. You spoken to him yet?”

“It’s not allowed until after the funeral.”

“Bah. You Sacarans with all your traditions,” Belion said as he pulled a face similar to the one he made when he scowled at the fungal-distilled liquor behind the bar.

“You don’t approve?” I asked, keen to draw him into another one of our conversations. One of the ones where we talked for hours on the ways of those who lived beyond Sacara. I was still picking apart everything he had said last time, trying to infer all that I could about the ways of those who lived in the world I could never visit.

“It’s just unnerving, that’s all,” he said. “When my old man croaked it, I was glad to see him gone. Bitter-old codger never did anything but complain.”

“You don’t wished that you could speak with him now he’s dead? Never had a question you wanted to ask, but only thought of it after he was gone?”

“Not enough to be happy with his Shade hanging around me like all those you’ve got walking about down here. It ain’t right.”

“You’re really content with the dead being forgotten like that? With never hearing their stories or gaining from their wisdom? The thought of living without my forefathers to guide me and keep me on the right path…” It made me feel hollow inside.

“I’ve survived this long without them,” Belion said, spreading his arms wide. “Let them rot in their graves in peace.”

“That attitude is precisely why no-one trusts you traders. You realise that, don’t you? Nobody wants to put their faith in those who don’t care about the ones who came before them. I’m surprised you’re even allowed into Sacara spouting sentiments like that. The disrespect you show towards the dead…”

Belion grinned. “It’s considered normal just about everywhere else I’ve been. It’s you Sacarans that are the unnatural ones, with your Shades roaming about and your deadmasks-”

“- deathmasks,” I corrected.

“Not to mention the fungi you’ve got growing here. Which reminds me,” he said, tapping a finger on the table. “Did you have to pick somewhere quite so far down the city to meet? Can’t say the aroma from your rot fields is my favourite smell.”

“It is a bit pungent, but I thought it best we not meet where anyone might recognise me,” I said, motioning to my great grandfather’s deathmask. It wasn’t the one I usually wore and I hoped that would provide some anonymity, especially since nobody of my acquaintance ever ventured this close to Lower Sacara willingly.

“Yeah, well, next time, I say we meet in one of those fancy places I keep having to pass on my way down here. How’s that girl of yours doing, by the way?” Belion asked, reaching into his pocket and making sure the table was clean before placing the map down, taking no risks over letting anything get to it and destroy years’ worth of work. “You married yet?”

“Her mother still won’t sanction the engagement.”

“Whyever not? I thought you were all powerful down here.”

“Not until after my forefathers approve me as their heir, I’m not. But it’ll all be sorted at the funeral tomorrow-turn.” So long as they didn’t reject me for, oh, say… sullying their name by meeting with a trader close to the border of Lower Sacara.

“Ah, well good luck to you. If I know anything about wedded bliss, then you’ll be needing it.”

Unfolding the map, he weighed it down with a couple of daggers he unsheathed from his belt. The worn and obviously neglected state of the blades made me wince. Metal cost a fortune to import into Sacara, so we treasured every item forged from it. Seeing Belion treat his weapons like they were as easily replaceable as a misplaced sack of mulch was galling to say the least.

My gaze caught on the new marks he had made on the map since I last saw it. We were close. Another journey, then he would have the route sorted. All those years spent figuring out which path might work, and here we were, almost within reach.

“Won’t be long now,” Belion said, pointing to the lines he had marked out. “There’s just this patch here that I haven’t found a way for you to get across safely. Route I went took too long. Even at the darkest time of the year, you’d still be caught out by sunrise a good hour from the next safe place to camp.”

His fingers moved across the long lines marked with time stamps as he spoke, they cut across his sketches of the lands I had longed to see all my life, all of them leading out from the small dot marked Sacara.

It was so tiny, so inconsequential in comparison to everything else out there that Belion must have seen, but my entire life had been spent inside that dot. All my forefathers and foremothers’ lives. As would the lives of any descendants I might have. Was it any wonder I had been haunted for so long by the dream of leaving?

Dropping Belion’s money onto the table to pay him for his work so far, I stood, scraping my chair back and saying goodbye to the boy I had been.

“Thank you for all this,” I said, motioning to the map and holding his gaze as I did, unable to look down at what I was abandoning for fear that I wouldn’t have the strength to leave it. “But I won’t be requiring your services anymore.”

The map would open the world beyond for all Sacarans, making it so they could leave the city and travel by night to other settlements nearby, avoiding the perils of sunlight since it blinded any Sacaran who saw it. Just thinking on all those the map could help left me reeling, but not as much as the reminder that it was all for nothing. It had to be.

I wasn’t that legacy-less boy who dreamt of leaving Sacara, not any more. I had known ever since my brother’s death that I could never leave. To go would be to let my forefathers’ Shades fade away. Along with everything else. My position in Sacara. My wealth. My engagement to Revana. Nothing lasted in the city without the efforts of the living to maintain it, so keeping my forefathers’ legacy alive depended on my staying and keeping the rot at bay. There was nothing else to it.

I had duties now, forefathers to represent. Citizens to rule over and protect. Leaving was the dream of a spare son who had nothing else to live for, one seeking a way to make himself worthy of being remembered, but that path wasn’t open to me anymore, and tricking myself into believing it was to indulge in the fantasy I had come here to put an end to.

I had to sever ties with Belion once and for all. It was the only way. If I didn’t prove my commitment to staying in Sacara, then I could kiss my inheritance and Revana goodbye. There was no way her mother would let her marry someone without a legacy to his name, and I couldn’t bear the thought of not being with her.

“What are you talking about?” Belion asked. “Another journey and it’ll be done.”

He gestured to the map and I forced myself not to look down, not trusting myself if I did.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

I turned to leave, but Belion called after me. “You don’t want to even keep it?”

Want it? Stars, how I wanted it. I wanted to fall asleep each turn staring at it, but I knew my corruption well. I wasn’t strong enough to win out against constant temptation. A turn would come when I would give in, when I would commission another trader to finish the map and unlock the world beyond. I might claim it was for the benefit of all Sacarans, but I knew deep inside that I would be the first one to leave. After all, I would have already left years ago if I had been able to do so before Tytus died.

I would give in eventually. How could I not? The addiction was too strong for me to resist forever, and the dead would know that. They understood my weakness and would judge me for it. Stars, they probably already thought me unworthy enough as it was. Hadn’t I already given into temptation just by coming here? Letting go of my boyhood dreams was the least I could do to prove myself to them. If I didn’t, then they would know there was always a chance that I would fail them eventually, and I couldn’t let that happen.

“Keep it,” I said, forcing the words out.

“For all the… You’re the damned one whose been pestering me to get it done all these years. It’s no use to me.”

“Then sell it,” I said. “There may be someone else out there who can recognise its value.”

“I doubt that. Why are you doing this? What’s changed?” he called after me as I pushed the tavern door aside and stepped out onto the dark Sacaran street. He had no knowledge of the sacrifice I was making. He asked what had changed.

Everything. Some dreams don’t survive the night.