

## 2nd STOP on the TIM LEBBON BLOG TOUR

Excerpt from **FALLEN, BY TIM LEBBON** (follows on from excerpt on My Favourite Books Blog)

FALLEN 29

‘I’ve spent a long time walking back and forth before the Divide,’ Ten began. ‘It draws you. I know I said earlier that it’s...terrifying, but there’s an attraction as well. It pulls you in and holds you close, and sometimes it just won’t let go.’

‘The first time I saw it, I was about twenty. I had a run-in with a band of marauders on the Pavissia Steppes, and I went south to get away from them. I knew what was supposed to be there, but I was young and feisty, and I’d just killed my first man...’

He trailed off, pouring more cydrax and looking at Nomi and Ramus. *Trying to see if we’re shocked*, Ramus thought. *Nomi is, I can see that. But I hope she won’t give him the satisfaction.*

‘Anyway,’ Ten said, and drank some more. ‘The feistiness didn’t last. I got away from the marauders and kept going south. After a long time I found the Divide...or maybe it found me. It’s a cliff that reaches into the sky.’ He looked up into the clear blue above them, shaking his head. ‘Here the sky has no scale. It’s blue and beautiful, but there’s no real sense of it. There, the Divide touches it, and seems to devour it. The cliff rises higher than the clouds, which seem to shroud its top permanently – if it even has one. It goes east and west as far as you can see, and disappears around the belly of the land. First time I saw it, I spent a whole moon camped a few miles from its base, thinking I would never get away. There was plenty of food; berry bushes, root crops, wild sheebok grazing along the foothills. I ate well. There were flying things that buzzed me, but they never came close again after I shot one down with my crossbow. In the evenings, I’d sit and listen to the tumblers rolling across the plains.’ He took another drink.

*Tumblers!* Ramus thought. *I always thought they were*

*legend!* But still he reserved judgement. Ten was a good storyteller, yet perhaps that was *all* he was. Time, as Ramus's mother had said, would tell.

'That was when I first started thinking for myself. Until then, I'd never truly been a wanderer. I walked, yes. I travelled from here to there, but I spent most of my time simply surviving. There in the shadow of the Divide, I came alive. I spent the nights sitting by my fire and thinking on what the Divide could mean. What was at its top, if it had one? What was behind it?'

'There's nothing behind it,' Nomi scoffed.

'Then why is it called a Divide?' Ramus asked.

Ten smiled. 'So I sat there night after night, a good meal in my belly and the cool night air alive in my senses. I'd been drinking only water for a couple of moons, and I felt so much closer to the land. Almost as if I could plunge my hand into its loam and touch its magic.'

'Pah!' Nomi snorted. 'You're no magichalan.' She regarded such people with derision, Ramus knew, though he could never understand why. She was a Voyager and had seen many strange things in the marshes of Ventgoria. Why not believe in magic?

'No, I'm not. But the Divide makes you appreciate the potential in things. And this whole world is thrumming with potential.'

Nomi chuckled and took a sip of her cydrax.

'How long did you stay there?' Ramus asked.

'Three moons, camped in its shadow. At dawn I'd see a moment of sun, and then only dusk. After a while, I started thinking about finding where it ended.'

'I've always heard that there is no end,' Ramus said. 'That it goes on, out beyond Noreela's shores.'

‘Maybe,’ Ten said. ‘But the closer I came to the eastern shore, the more treacherous the landscape became. Plain turned to marsh, and then bog. The bogs were venting poisonous gases, and there were creatures in there...huge. I never saw them, but I heard them, and I felt the ground shiver as they rose and rolled. So I worked northward, leaving the Divide’s shadow at last. And by the time I reached the shore, I could no longer see the Divide. The bogs steamed, the clouds closed in, and wherever that cliff struck the coast was out of view.’

‘I would have stayed there, but the bog gas would have killed me eventually. And if not the gas, those things that lived there.’ He opened the third bottle of cydrax. The alcohol seemed to be having little effect. ‘I could hear them rising from the bog and dragging themselves towards me. Perhaps they were close. Or perhaps they were a long way off, and larger than I imagine. I didn’t stay to find out.’

‘Voyagers have tried sailing past the Divide,’ Nomi said.

‘Piss,’ Ramus said. ‘They’ve set out with that intention, but no one knows if they succeeded, because they’ve not been seen again.’

Ten nodded, a satisfied smile on his face.

‘Maybe they’re still sailing,’ Ramus speculated.

‘Or maybe,’ the wanderer said, ‘they’re in the stomachs of the bog beasts, or at the bottom of the sea, or washed up rotting against the shore. Noreela is a hungry land.’

‘You have a way of making it such an attractive place,’ Ramus said, but his interest was piqued. ‘Go on. What happened next?’

‘I went west,’ Ten said. ‘I travelled again in the shadow of the Divide, heading for the western shores. I hoped that there

I would find what the east had hidden, but I was wrong.'

'What was there?' Nomi asked.

'A jungle. I started in, but the trees soon grew so close together that I could barely pass by. And there were creatures there, too. Spiders as big as my hand; snakes as thick as my thigh; ants; worms with teeth; flies that sucked my blood and left poison in its place. And other things, not animals. Not human. A *bad* place. I only touched its outer extremes, but I knew it went on for days.'

'So you went north?' Ramus asked. 'Tried to skirt the forest but keep the Divide in view? Only the forest grew north as well, and by the time you reached the western shores, the Divide was too far away to see?'

Ten stared at him for some time; so long that Ramus looked away, unnerved. 'You don't believe me,' Ten said.

'I've met a lot of wanderers in my time, and they're known to...elaborate.'

'Ramus,' Nomi said, her voice bearing a warning.

'I'm telling the truth,' Ten said. 'If any Voyager had made it back from that place, they'd tell you the same.'

'But you have more to tell,' Ramus said.

Ten glanced at Nomi, reached into his cloak and then decided against it. 'I'll tell you first,' he said. 'Then I'll show you.'

Ramus sat back and crossed his hands on his stomach.

'I walked back along the Divide. Camped here and there, ate well, listened to the tumblers in the north. It took me two moons to gather the courage to do what I knew I must.'

'You climbed,' Nomi said.

Ten nodded slowly. 'Up into the foothills first. And then, where the hills ended and the cliffs began, I started up.' He

leant forward, elbows resting on the table, long hair hanging down to either side of his face. 'I never got very high, but I found signs that others had climbed before me.'

'What signs?' Ramus asked, but he could already guess.

'Bodies. Or what was left of them. Skeletons mostly, but some were...fresher. Looked as if they'd been chewed. And all badly broken, as if they had climbed higher, then fallen.'

'Fallen,' Ramus whispered. 'How many?'

Ten shrugged. 'Six? Eight? I climbed eight times at various points along the Divide. I made it three hundred steps high, maybe four hundred, and then...'

'No more routes,' Ramus said. 'Like the cliffs were never meant to be climbed.'

Ten shook his head. 'Not that, no. I could have gone further on at least two occasions. But every time I found a body, I lost my nerve.'

'So you never got as high as the clouds?'

'Nowhere near.'

'And no one else did, either?'

'I can't know that. If they did, and did not fall, then...'

'Maybe they're still climbing?'

'Or maybe they reached the top.'

'It's believed there is no top,' Nomi said.

'Of course,' Ramus said. 'If there *was* a top to the Great Divide, there would be something south of the cliff face. For most Noreelans, that's unthinkable. It's been a problem for thinkers for centuries. There are books full of it.'

'You've seen these books?' Ten asked.

'A couple. There's one in the Marrakash Library, not a mile from here. And I know people who keep books to themselves.'

'I could write one,' Ten said. 'And I could give it an ending.'

Ramus laughed again. ‘You tell a good story, wanderer, but you need more than words and hearsay to...’

Ten reached into his cloak again, and this time his eyes were full of purpose. Nomi sat up straighter. She looked at Ramus, her eyes sparkling with something he had only ever rarely seen on her face: the thrill of discovery.

Ten brought out a rolled parchment, tied with a knot of leather.

‘What’s this?’ Ramus asked.

The knot whispered as it came apart. ‘I found these close to one of the bodies.’

‘What are they?’

The wanderer flattened the parchment pages – three of them – across the table, his hands still obscuring the uppermost page. ‘The body was broken,’ he said. ‘Every bone shattered, as though he or she had fallen from a great height.’ He glanced around, sat back and revealed the pages. ‘Perhaps all the way from the top.’

Ramus leant forward and turned his head, and for a heartbeat the images did not register.

And then he saw.

‘Well?’ Nomi whispered.

Ramus touched the top page and traced the first of the images. ‘By every fucking god that ever touched Noreela!’ he said.

‘Not *every* god,’ Ten said. ‘Just this one.’

Ramus sent Ten away. Nomi objected, but Ramus gave her one of his harsh stares.

‘Don’t go elsewhere,’ Nomi said. ‘We’re the Voyagers you need to deal with on this. I have the ear of Marquella, and he

has the support of the Guild. If we feel that this is worth pursuing, I can ensure that you're paid everything you're due.'

Standing beside the table, the wanderer seemed taller than ever. The sun cast his shadow across Nomi's face, and she wondered what it would be like to live in shadow for ever. 'I'll be back at noon,' he said. But he seemed to find it difficult to leave the pages behind.

'You can trust us,' Ramus said.

'It's not about trust,' Ten said. 'I've had those with me for a long time.'

'We'll look after them,' Nomi said. She smiled her most charming smile, and the wanderer was looking at her as he walked away, not at what he had left behind.

Savi came to their table when he had left, and Nomi asked for some water and a bowl of river cherries. She felt like a treat.

'So what do you think?' she asked at last.

Ramus sat back in his chair, hands clasped in front of his face, eyes never moving from the parchment. His stubble was three days old, and Nomi could see the dirt beneath his fingernails. She knew the signs. He needed to go out again.

'How can we ignore this, Ramus?' she said passionately.

'It could be a hoax.' And there it was, his pissing cynicism, coming to the fore. He once told her something his mother had told him: *Everything is a lie until proven*. She hated that attitude, yet it gave him the endlessly inquisitive, questing mind that she so lacked.

'It's no hoax, Ramus. Look closer. You're a Voyager, and so am I. We have our differences, I know. But can't you see what this could be? The biggest find since Sordon Perlenni first went out! This could mean...' She swept her hand across the

surface of the top parchment, wondering whose hand had hovered there to draw those images and symbols, and what it had looked like. 'This could mean a whole new race of Noreelans.'

'On top of the Divide?'

'Yes. And more, Ramus.' She pointed at the bottom corner of the second parchment, and at the curled thing, sleeping like an infant in its mother's womb. She'd already seen him eyeing the image and looking away again, terrified and excited. Her voice was a whisper. 'You know what that is.'

He looked at her, then back to the parchments. He stood quickly, his chair squealing back across the deck as he snatched them up. 'I have to examine these.'

'Ramus—'

'Why did you come to me?' he said, glaring at her.

Nomi could only be honest. 'You're the most brilliant person I know.'

Ramus dipped his head, acknowledging the fact rather than accepting the praise. 'Then let me take these to the library. I'll meet you back here a half before noon.'

Nomi watched him leave, the parchment rolled and hidden beneath his jacket. For a moment she went to call him back, offer to go with him. But books were Ramus's domain.

Nomi Hyden walked through the waterside market, trying to curb her excitement and think about all the arrangements she must make.

While Ramus examined the pages, she needed to put a voyage together.

Walking towards her home, unconsciously taking the quieter route so that she could think, the plan formed itself in

her mind like a map. Naru May's was at the beginning, and at the end – two miles uphill to the south – was her home. Between those two points, other vital destinations began to take shape.

Nomi always thought this way – images, pictures, visions of what was to come. It came of being a dreamer, she supposed, but it was also a product of her map-making mind. A good map could light the way for even the most troubled soul. And a great map could change the lie of the land. Miss a troublesome street here, a run-down hovel there, and you altered the nature of the place you're mapping. Districts can be moved by a map-maker; not physically, but in the minds of all those who read their work. She could toy with people's perception of places, names and geographies, or she could make them see straight. Mostly she had no need for obfuscation, but sometimes having the talent could help.

She guessed she had gained this furtive approach to map-drawing on her first voyage to Ventgoria. There, nothing stayed the same. A path leading to this place one year would lead somewhere else the following year. A hill would become a marshy plain in the space of a long, wet winter, and ponds and pools drained and refilled with the frequency of leaves falling and fresh buds forming. It was a land that defied mapping, and those locals who would deign to talk to her blamed the steam dragons. They said the dragons came when the steam vents opened, snaked their way through the land just below the surface, straightening serpentine rivers and forcing hills of mud and stone from the sodden ground. And then they vented their steam and moulded the land into its new shape.

Nomi smiled at the stories, but she spent most of her first voyage there losing herself in the Ventgorian wilds. Even when

she found a settlement, it might not be there the next day. The only things that seemed defined and fixed were the vast aerial grape plants, mile upon mile of vines networked between the Bole trees. The sun was hot and constant, the moisture from below billowing in occasional steam clouds, and she had found the best crop for the perfect wine.

The dependable plants had pinned her to the land, and their produce provided the wealth she now enjoyed.

If she walked fast and made her deals quickly, she would be back at Naru May's bathed, changed and ready to plan the voyage of her life.

*With Ramus.* That was exciting, but it troubled her as well. They had a complex history. So much time together, so many secrets. If she'd ever had siblings to compare him to, she might have thought of him as a brother.

Yet this was bigger than them. What Ten had brought would provide riches, glory, knowledge and danger enough for them both. And for the first time, the thought of what they were facing frightened rather than thrilled her.

Beko Havison lived in the basement rooms beneath a tavern. He was a Serian – a soldier from Mancoseria ready to sell his experience to the Guild of Voyagers – and he had accompanied Nomi on her second voyage to Ventgoria. It had been a relatively trouble-free journey, other than her sickness, but she had always seen the potential in him. They had talked a lot on that trip, and he had professed a love of free poetry, but the raw strength that had seen him through five voyages was obvious. He could talk endlessly about moonlight touching the stark branches of a lightning tree, but he could never hide his scars.

To be continued at the next tour stop...

15th May on Highlander's Book Review