

## 1ST STOP on the TIM LEBBON BLOG TOUR

Excerpt from **FALLEN, BY TIM LEBBON** (follows on from excerpt on author's website - find it here)

18 TIM LEBBON

Ramus had never thought of Nomi Hyden as a real Voyager. To him voyaging was a way of life, not a means to an end, and the wealth Nomi had gathered during and after her two voyages to Ventgoria had bought off whatever spirit she'd had to begin with. She was rich in coin but poor in heart, and that had always been a barrier between them. Ramus had little but knew much, and he strove to know more.

It had been over a year since he returned from his last voyage, bringing back maps, charts, plant samples, three books and a collection of myths from the Widow in the mountains. The mountains had no name, and neither did the woman, but she claimed to be adept at magichala – rich in the knowledge of the plants, animals and seasons of her land – and he was beginning to believe her claim. He had made three voyages into her mountains, and each time she showed him more.

He craved to go further. He had voyaged across the north of Noreela: the Cantrassan coast, Pengulfin Woods, and two sea journeys out to some of the unnamed islands of The Spine. And though his *real* vision took him past the mountains, past the Pavissia Steppes and into the uncharted areas to the south, he had no money to hire Serians to guard his way, and the Guild of Voyagers would not aid him. Most of them thought he was a minor Voyager given to mad dreams.

He simply wanted to be the best.

With Ramus filled with thwarted desires, Nomi angered him. Her money could take her anywhere, yet she had only ever been to Ventgoria: the first time, he still believed, with a true sense of discovery; the second, simply to establish a continuing exportation of finest Ventgorian fruits, which now

flavoured the wine that had made her name. She lived well on the proceeds.

And now, this. He was intrigued. He would not be able to sleep again that night, so he made himself some red root tea, took out some books – his own treasures – and began to read.

It was a mile down to the river. Ramus gave himself plenty of time.

He always enjoyed watching the city come awake. As the sun peered around the shoulders of the mountains to the east it seemed to cast life upon Long Marrakash, sending away the night things – and there were some, though most people did their best to ignore them – and giving the city back to the day. There was always a sense of enthusiasm about daybreak. Most people attributed this to the potential in the time to come, though some claimed it was thanks for the days gone by. A few, if questioned in one of the wine rooms after a few cups of root wine, would claim that it was gratitude for surviving the night.

*She came to me in the night*, he thought. That troubled him. *Whatever it is that's excited her, she came through the dangerous dark to invite me down here.* There were night blights that lived in shadows, and grew and shrank with them. There were the Stalkers, who slept by the day and made the darkness *their* time; normal people with abnormal desires, though many sought to make monsters of them. And there were other things: the wraiths of those long gone, and truer shadows that had a semblance of life. Long Marrakash was the heart of Marrakash, and Marrakash was the heart of Noreela, yet even here people vanished into the darkness and were never seen again.

But day was good, and dawn was the hour of worship, especially for those who worshipped commerce: traders and dealers rushing this way and that to reach their shops, Cantrassan street vendors shouting at their slaves as they pushed loaded wagons to market, egg sellers shrilling at their flocks as they wheeled extravagant perches through the crowds, wholesalers flitting from one shop to another as they muttered orders under their breath, and people sitting along the streets taking breakfast before a full day of buying and selling, trading and dealing, loaning and hiring.

There were also those who chose to give dawn's hour to their own particular gods. Ramus passed by several groups chanting and running their fingers over runes carved into the foundations of ancient buildings. Some claimed to understand what the runes meant, but Ramus knew that they were all but unreadable, the forgotten language of a vanished civilisation. Perhaps if the giant stones had been brought here in order and assembled in the correct sequence, they may have retained their meaning. But all across Long Marrakash, similar blocks were incorporated into buildings upside down and back to front. Most were badly weathered, and Ramus could not help looking down on those who worshipped them. The runes were the history of a long-dead people, their story spread across the city like crumbs from broken bread. Paying homage to such a tale was like worshipping dust.

Others crowded into temples built to the moon gods, or gathered around shamans in the street. Some of these shamans could read, and they held books as examples of their power. A few used such knowledge to twist the histories they read, telling stories to give themselves honoured backgrounds or imaginary ancestors, and Ramus despised such perversions of knowledge.

But he reserved greater hatred for those taken in by it.

Halfway to the river he passed a relatively new building – perhaps only five generations old – that housed a shrine to the Sleeping Gods. It was a simple stone structure without windows, a variety of symbols carved on the outside, a glow emanating through the door from the hundreds of candles burning inside, and once again Ramus felt its draw. *I have my own beliefs*, he would tell himself and anyone interested enough to listen. *The God of Knowledge, and the power of the land. Nobody tells me what to think.*

Still, sometimes he considered going inside. The Sleeping Gods had long been a fascination for the Voyagers, ever since the first Voyager, Sordon Perlenni, had set out to discover their legend one hundred and forty-three years before. He had returned again and again, from different parts of Noreela, but all he had ever brought back were more scraps of campfire myth. Some said those benevolent gods were Noreela's First, its founders and shapers, and that they had gone down to sleep – and left Noreela open and available – when the humans arrived.

Perlenni had vanished over a century before, and some believed he had found what he was seeking. Others suspected he had simply been swallowed into the distant parts of Noreela like so many Voyagers since.

A distant bell rang, and Ramus realised he would be late for his meeting with Nomi.

Naru May's was an expensive eatery built on a heavy timber deck over the River Kash, and Ramus only ever ate here with Nomi. He much preferred the food from street vendors back in the Heights – it was fresher, cooked better, and a tenth of

the price – but in the valley was where the wealth congregated. He didn't mind venturing down here on occasion, so long as Nomi paid.

He paused a hundred steps from the wooden bridge leading out to the deck, taking in the scenery.

The riverside was bustling. Fishing sloops bobbed on the waves, nets cast, and a few had already offloaded their morning's catch. The scent of fresh fish filled the air, and a few impromptu auctions had started.

Along the riverfront, traders had set up stalls, and the largest was run by a dozen heavily tattooed Cantrass Angels selling fine woven cloth: silk so sheer it was almost weightless, rugs, and decorative hangings. Some of the women were naked – clothed only in the complex and mystical tattoos – and their stall was busy. Ramus had never trusted their kind. There was far more going on with them than anyone ever saw, and he believed that one day they would be revealed as something more than simple weavers and traders. And indeed, buying and selling was not the only exchange occurring at their stall. While ten women displayed, two stood back in the shadows, examining the crowd with dark eyes and making cryptic marks on their bodies. Black ink, traced there using the claws of mountain wolves.

Ramus was certain their tattoos changed day by day.

Further along the riverside a couple of transport boats nudged against the stone quay, their decks dark with piled cages of differing types and sizes. Ramus could smell the animals from here, and not all of the smells were familiar. Sheebok was the strongest – the rich, pungent stench of shit and fear from a species that seemed to know it was bred only for eating. But there were other, wilder scents, and he debated

whether or not to investigate. The trade in exotic food was increasing as the Age of Expansion pushed the borders of civilisation ever-southward, and he had often commented to Nomi that some people were too greedy to consider the dangers of what they were bringing back. She had laughed at him, of course. *A goat from here is the same as a goat from there*, she'd said. But he had reminded her of her own voyages to Ventgoria, and what she had seen there, and her expression had clouded for a few beats before she waved his concerns away.

He had heard of ravens existing far to the south that stole dreams. Pecked holes in skulls while their victims were asleep. Bring a few mating pairs of those things to Long Marrakash and—

'Ramus!'

He blinked, looked at the wooden bridge and saw Nomi standing there. A tall, slender man stood behind her, head bowed. She beckoned Ramus over.

'Ramus, this is Ten.'

Ramus nodded at the tall man. 'First name, last, or one in between?'

'Only name,' Ten said.

Ramus held out his hands and, after a brief pause, the man grasped them in his own. 'Good travels,' Ramus said.

Ten smiled, a hint of mockery behind the leathery mask of his face.

'Let's eat!' Nomi said. 'I'm starving. I hear they caught a cloud of river plumes last night. Shall we?'

Nomi went first and, after an awkward moment, Ten followed. Ramus came last, using the time it took them to reach Naru May's to examine the man.

He really was a wanderer. Ramus had been doubtful last night, but the man's true nature was obvious. The mix of clothes, skin leathered by the sun and elements, neutral accent – although Ramus thought he'd detected a twang of the Pavissia Steppes somewhere in there. Ten also exuded the vague superiority projected by every wanderer when they visited a settlement, especially one as large as Long Marrakash. The feeling was often well earned; the average wanderer had seen more than most Noreelans.

It was also rare that they lived into old age. The dangers of Noreela would take them – the harsh elements, clashes with other wanderers, nomadic tribes or marauders, or falling prey to some of Noreela's deadlier wildlife. This man looked ten years Ramus's senior, which Ramus could respect. He carried a long bow over his left shoulder, a quiver of arrows across his back and a short, wide sword in a scabbard strapped to his leg. Ramus could hear the clinks of other weapons secreted beneath his cloak.

They took a table close to the edge of the deck and a server hurried across, ignoring the outstretched hands of several other patrons.

'Savi,' Nomi said, 'it's a good morning, and we have a guest. I want a bowl of sautéed river plumes, a selection of bread, a bottle of cydrax...' She looked at Ramus, eyebrows raised.

'Sheebok testicles?' Ramus asked. The girl nodded, then looked at Ten.

The tall man said nothing.

'And a bowl of plumes for my guest,' Nomi said. 'And Savi? The good plumes. Make sure they haven't dried out.'

'Of course, Mam Hyden.' The girl hurried away to the

covered kitchen at the corner of the deck.

‘You might as well own this place,’ Ramus said.

Nomi shrugged. ‘Ten, this is the man I was telling you about.’

‘The Voyager?’ Ten looked at Ramus, appraising him for the first time. ‘Where have you been?’

For a heartbeat Ramus was ready to curse him. But he sensed Nomi’s tension, her simmering excitement, and he was intrigued. Piss, he was more than intrigued, he was *interested*.

‘My main interest is the unnamed mountains, bordering Ventgoria and—’

‘I know where they are,’ Ten said. ‘Where else?’

‘Penguin Woods,’ Ramus said. ‘The Cantrassan coast. Some of the islands of The Spine.’

Ten nodded thoughtfully. ‘I’ve been to the Divide.’

The table fell silent. Ramus held his breath, waiting for Ten’s expression to break into a mocking smile, but it did not. His eyes were cool, his mouth downturned.

Nomi’s eyes glittered.

‘No one has been there and returned,’ Ramus said.

Ten snorted and rolled his eyes. ‘You believe that?’

‘Of course. I know that. I’m a Voyager, of the Guild of Voyagers. I know three Voyagers who went south for the Great Divide over the space of ten years. No one has seen them again.’

‘Haven’t they?’

‘Stop answering me with pissing questions!’

‘Why?’ Ten smiled, and Ramus realised he was playing the wanderer’s game.

‘What’s it like there?’ Nomi asked.

The wanderer looked past Ramus at the kitchen, lifting his

head and sniffing the scent of food on the air. 'That's part of my story,' he said.

'Is that where you found what you showed me last night?' Nomi asked.

'What *did* he show you?' Ramus was becoming frustrated that the stranger seemed to have taken control of the conversation. He likely spent nine-tenths of his life on his own, yet in company he had quickly and easily gained the advantage.

Nomi looked across the table at Ramus, jaw clenching as if ready to speak. But then she shook her head. 'It's for him to show and tell,' she said. 'But Ramus, you know I wouldn't have come to you with something trivial.'

'Not friends?' Ten asked, glancing from one to the other.

'We're Voyagers,' Ramus said.

'Ah. And voyaging doesn't allow friendships.' Ten took a spiced nut from the bowl on the table and chewed slowly.

*That's right*, Ramus thought. *He knows us well*. He glanced at Nomi and she looked quickly away.

Savi came with a bottle of cydrax and three mugs, and three plates balanced on her right hand and arm. She placed them on the table with a flourish. 'Anything else, Mam Nomi?'

Nomi indicated the two empty tables next to them. 'Some privacy would be good. Keep those tables free, if you will.'

Savi nodded, glanced at Ten and walked quickly away.

'Sweet.' Ten said.

'She's thirteen.'

The tall man shrugged.

'Why are you called Ten?' Ramus asked.

'I was my mother's tenth child.'

Ramus nodded thoughtfully and pushed the roasted

testicles around his plate. The sauce looked perfect, the meat tender and delicious. 'It's an unlucky number for some.'

'It was for my mother. She died having me.'

'I'm sorry.'

Ten chewed a huge spoonful of river plumes and sighed with delight. 'I never knew her,' he said through a full mouth. 'But she had a good life for a wanderer, and long, and I'm told she loved her children well.'

Ramus looked across at Nomi. She was spooning her food around the plate, frowning, tense and expectant. He could see the excitement there that had been so apparent last night, but this morning it was tempered by something else. Caution, perhaps? Or concern that this wanderer could take them for fools?

'Many people have seen the Great Divide,' Ten continued, his voice dropping slightly. He finished his mouthful and put his spoon down. 'Truly, I have seen it. But few who see it choose to talk about it. It's...frightful.'

'Huge?'

'Massive. Immense. But not only that. It bears its own awful gravity, that tears the wonder from you and replaces it with fear. It's the end of the world. At least, that's what legend says. But...there's more. Truly.' Ten frowned and shook his head, as if to loosen a memory. He poured a generous mug of cydrax, hesitated, then poured for Nomi and Ramus as well.

'Surely some who have seen it could talk about it? You are.'

'I have better reason than most.'

'And that is...?'

'The parchments,' Nomi said. 'You found them there.'

Ten nodded and took a deep swig of cydrax. He belched lightly and drank some more.

‘Parchments?’ Ramus asked. He hated being led along, but there was something behind this story and Ten’s telling of it that rang true. Maybe it was Nomi’s fascination and excitement. Or more likely, it was Ten’s obvious discomfort.

‘You read?’ the wanderer asked.

‘Of course. I’m a Voyager, and the mind is the greatest place to explore. The minds of others, too, when they choose to record what they think and know.’

Ten looked across at Nomi. She nodded. ‘That’s why I told him. Perhaps he can read the parchments.’

‘Then they’re worth something?’ the wanderer asked.

*And it all comes down to this, Ramus thought. Money. Well, I’m glad Nomi is here.*

‘Let me see them,’ Ramus said, ‘and—’

‘You’ll hear my tale first,’ Ten said.

Ramus finished his food and leant back in his chair. The world went on around them. People ate and chatted, boats and sloops drifted along and across the river, traders traded and fishermen fished. But he suddenly felt more removed than usual.

He always felt like a visitor to Long Marrakash. He was driven to travel and explore – scratchy feet, his mother had called it – and whenever he lived in the city, even for two or three years at a time, it always felt temporary. Just somewhere to rest and plan his next voyage.

Nomi waved Savi over and ordered two more bottles of cydrax, and the three of them fell silent. Then Ten started talking, and Ramus experienced an instant of intense emotion: excitement, exhilaration, and the taste of a fresh voyage ahead.

\* \* \*

To be continued at the next tour stop...

13th May on the Allison & Busby Blog