

5th STOP on the TIM LEBBON BLOG TOUR

Excerpt from **FALLEN, BY TIM LEBBON** (follows on from excerpt on Falcata Times)

CHAPTER THREE

The dream had assailed Ramus as he dozed off after seeing Nomi from his rooms: a Sleeping God rising from the ground, fearful, dreadful and unknowable. But the Sleeping God risen was a trifle compared to the sense that he was someone else.

What do we have if not our own identity? Even Nomi would agree. She had her home up in the hills, her ornaments and objects of worth brought back from voyages or purchased with her Ventgorian wine profits, but most of all she still had herself. Even Nomi – shallow perhaps, but still intelligent and broad-minded – would surely agree with that?

He groaned, holding his head as though to squeeze out the pain. The attacks were becoming worse, and more frequent. He should see the healer before he went, though the healer had already told him that there was little she could do for a disease of the mind.

Such a thing eats at itself, she had said. *And while I've never seen one like this before, I can see the swellings behind your eyes. There's a mass, and if it follows patterns I've seen before, it will get larger, the symptoms will worsen, and then you will die.*

The healer's words echoed back at him, as they often did when he was alone and suffering another strange dream.

Ramus sat up eventually, sipping water and trying to sigh away the dregs of pain. Strange how it never actually hurt during the dream, only after. Almost as if he really were being ripped away for a time, and the pain came from being forced back into his own body, his own mind.

'I should tell Nomi,' he whispered. But upon voicing the idea he instantly shoved it away. He had not told a soul, and he never would. This was his own final voyage, the greatest of them all, and he could share it with no one.

Next morning Ramus spent some time studying several maps of Noreela, trying to piece together clues about the uncharted terrain south of the Pavissia Steppes. Voyagers had gone that way before, but of those who returned, few were adept at mapping their routes. Ramus had painstakingly copied any voyage maps he could lay his hands on, either at the Guild or in the library, and he kept the copies in his rooms. He had never attempted to amalgamate them before, because a mistake repeated would only be doubled. But they were all he had.

Some indicated that much of the uncharted area was forest. Another map suggested that marshland took up a large proportion of the land down there. Both possibilities would offer differing problems, and Ramus hoped fervently that some of the terrain at least was plain or grassland. Some said that the land there was deceptive, shifting, as though it were a young land still trying to find its lie.

So he decided to create his own map, drawing together as much information as he could from the others, and he

worked until well after midday. As he worked, he wondered yet again why it had taken so long for the Three Hearts – Long Marrakash, Cantrassa and Pengulfin Landing – to explore the rest of their world. Some said it was a leftover from the farming stock that they all descended from; simple folk who spent their lives working the land and rarely thought of moving on. Others suggested that it was a fear of the unknown set against the comfort in which much of Noreela lived. Ramus thought there was an element of truth in both, but that the real problem was a dearth of imagination.

Since the start of the Age of Expansion – with Sordon Perlenni’s momentous voyage to, and naming of, Sordon Sound – things had been changing. The frontier was being pushed further south, but with each hundred miles advanced, it seemed that settlers regressed to a more savage state. There were vicious marauders down there, and talk of wars, sacrifice and cannibalism. That in itself was enough to put off prospective travellers.

And there was the barrier. No physical thing, but something more deeply rooted in the psychology of all Noreela. Their history was long and misty, but it was always underlined by the presence of the Great Divide. Many were aware of it, some even talked about it, but few acknowledged the effect that it had on them, whether they were three hundred or seven hundred miles away. Hardly anyone alive would ever see it, but everyone knew it was there. And with it came the enigma that would trouble anyone who thought for themselves: what was beyond the Divide? *Nothing* was the generally accepted answer. But the problems with that answer were many, and any alternate theories only encouraged more enigmas.

So the Divide pushed people away, like the opposing points of compass stones.

Ramus liked enigmas.

He worked on, and soon his room became a garden of parchment with him at its centre. He scratched away at the square of parchment he had chosen to write on, but even before he had finished, he knew that the map he had created was more than half guesswork. He noted the observations from Ten's story – the heavily wooded land at the Divide's western shoulder, the impassable marshes to the east – and the space before the great cliff he left blank. He wished he had quizzed the wanderer more on his journey, but something told him that would not have done much good. Wanderers were known for their secrecy. Ten had only shared his story to convince them of the parchment's worth.

By the time the sun had reached its zenith and started its own journey towards night, Ramus had done as much as he could. The map would offer them direction, if not accurate information. He gathered the various shreds and copies of older maps, rolled them together and shoved them beneath his bed.

He would sleep here for one more night. In the meantime, there was his mother to visit before he left, and his travelling gear to prepare. Backpack, weapon roll, compass stones, and the blank book he had been saving for such an occasion. Bound in strong leather covers, containing almost two hundred sheets of fine paper made in the mills of Pengulfin Landing, it had been a gift to him from his mother a dozen years before. *To keep track of your travels*, she had said, but even now the pages were still blank. He hated the idea that,

once filled, the book would tell the tale of an average life.

It was time for the pages to bear ink. *The things we'll see, he thought. The images I can create, the routes I will map, the details I can write. And someday perhaps a future Voyager will pore over my book, and they will learn.*

Ramus opened his bottle of ink and chose his finest quill. On the first page of the book he wrote:

*The Final Voyage of Ramus Rheel
Year 145, Age of Expansion
In the company of Nomi Hyden*

He sat back and stared at the page. When he turned it over, the stark white of the next sheet suddenly seemed emptier than ever.

Nomi went about shutting up her home. She gathered her travelling gear together, then started taking down the expensive wall hangings and other items of wealth. But she soon stopped. *We'll be back, she thought. Ramus is as doom-laden as ever, but we'll return triumphant. Let him worry about his foolish myths.* She left and went to the home of her sometime helper. The old woman and her three younger daughters had spent their lives in the service of rich clients, and now Nomi had a big task for them. She told the woman that she was leaving on a journey, and that her home should be maintained in its current state – aired frequently, plants tended, floors cleaned, shields and other metalwork polished. She gave the woman a series of promise tokens which she could exchange for pieces each month, and the old lady smiled and nodded her assent.

Her home and belongings taken care of, Nomi left to tell her friends. Some of them she visited at their homes, and over a glass of root wine she told them that she was leaving on a special voyage about which she could reveal nothing. None of them mentioned the Guild. Several other friends she met in the First Heart Wine Rooms. By mid-afternoon they were already merry from several bottles, yet Nomi found herself growing curiously distant. *Almost as if we're already halfway there.*

Afterwards, she walked down to the river and stood on its shores, staring across at the distant opposite bank and thinking of the Guild buildings huddled there. That made her feel good. Nobody was telling her what to do. This was her and Ramus, and though sometimes he enraged her, confused her, and intimidated her with his vast knowledge, she was glad they were doing this together.

She spent that last night in her rooms, and it no longer felt like home.

Ramus had slept well, and no nightmares welcomed in the dawn. He hoped that was a good sign. He'd spent the previous evening packing and preparing his voyaging paraphernalia, so when he woke an hour before sunrise, he only had to dress and leave. He locked the door and pocketed the key.

He had a very real sense that he would not be returning. No nightmares last night, true, but he could still feel the weight of the sickness in his head. Recently, whole days would pass when he forgot that he was ill, and then the brain disease would cut in with a shadow on the sun, a vision behind his eyelids or pure pain, and he would be dragged back to reality with a blink. *Chasing myself*, he thought. *Chasing my own mortality.*

He bought breakfast from an early street vendor and ate while he was walking. His bags were heavy, containing several books, his clothing and weapons, and a roll of maps, including the new one he had made yesterday. But he felt fit and ready, and he enjoyed breaking a sweat as he climbed the hill and headed south.

Though dawn painted the horizon to the east, shadows still ruled the streets, though most were shrinking back to wait out the day. Once or twice he heard a whisper as he passed, and he looked down at his feet, not wishing to attract attention. At one point, passing through a narrow path between high buildings, several shapes darted across the alley before him. He paused, then drew a knife and carried on. *Not people*, he thought. He heard no footsteps, no breathing. Wraiths.

By all the gods true and false, let me live to the end of this voyage, he thought.

He marched up the steep hill south of Long Marrakash, and when he stood on its summit he turned back and looked down at the city. It was coming to life now, the sun having broken the horizon and sent random shadows to ground. The streets became busier, noise rose to defeat the relative silence of night, and in the distance he could see the river glimmering through veils of mist.

He turned his back on the city with no regrets.

Pancet's Stables were nestled at the foot of the hill leading out of Long Marrakash. The lower hillside was taken with paddocks and grazing fields, while the stables themselves were a series of eight long, parallel timber buildings running north to south. The horses spent much of their days out in the fields, and most nights they were brought into the stables for safety.

There were things on the plains to the south that would eat them given a chance, and thieves worked the city's outskirts.

Beside the stables were several buildings made from logs, reeds and mud, and smoke rose cheerfully from a couple of chimneys. From the path leading down the hillside Ramus could see people moving around and, closer to the first of the stables, a group of horses was tethered. They were big animals with long manes and tails that almost swished the ground, ranging from dark brown to a light, sandy yellow. Cantrassan horses: tough, dependable and expensive. He hoped that this was a sign of Nomi's preparations.

He started down the hill, already feeling the sore spots on his shoulders where the backpack rubbed. *Getting old*, he thought. He blinked, his vision blurring for an instant before resolving itself again. Sometimes he forgot about his sickness and believed he really would grow old.

Going downhill felt good. Beyond the stables, past the small wood that sprung from the fertile ground at the hill's base, he could see the rolling land that led south and east toward the Pavissia Steppes. The border was less than a hundred miles in that direction, guarded by a series of outposts that were manned by the Chieftains' men. Beyond were the wilds, and Ramus suddenly craved that freedom with every heartbeat. Now that the voyage had begun, he wanted to be in the thick of it. He had always hated those first couple of days, moving across lands that were mapped, through settlements known and named. It was a false start.

He hummed to himself, an old Cantrassan song he often heard in the taverns down by the river, and the first he knew about the man shadowing him was when a knife pressed to his throat.

To be continued at the next tour stop...
23rd May on FantasyBookSpot (BSC Review)