

7th STOP on the TIM LEBBON BLOG TOUR

Excerpt from **FALLEN, BY TIM LEBBON** (follows on from excerpt on FantasyBookSpot (BSCReview))

CHAPTER FOUR

Nomi rode beside Beko at the head of their small group. It felt good to be in the saddle again. Since the end of her second and last voyage to Ventgoria she had only ridden a handful of times. She sometimes went riding with friends up into the foothills of the Marrakash Mountains, but each such trip took several days, and it cost a lot in protection. Many people had gone into these mountains and never returned, and while Nomi believed most of them simply lost their way and fell victim to hunger, hidden crevasses, or cold, some talked of cloud-creatures in the high passes that viewed travellers as succulent treats. Many who spread such rumours were mercenary Serians who benefited from the protection payments.

She was glad that not all Serians were so deceptive. When she had ridden with Beko before she found him to be open, honest and simple. Not unintelligent – not at all – but his life was uncomplicated. He worked for the Guild, he went on journeys, and in between he lived a comfortable life in Long Marrakash, with no real worries or troubles. No harsh

Mancoserian wind-seasons to contend with. No seethe-gators slinking from the shallows when the moons were on the wane.

‘Are you happy, Beko?’

He did not answer for a while and Nomi glanced sideways, thinking she may have surprised him. But he seemed calm, wearing his usual slight smile.

‘Happier today than yesterday,’ he said. ‘I like to see the land. I like to work. Wandering has been in my blood since I left Mancoseria twelve years ago, and I sometimes think the further I am from that place, the better. So yes, happier today than yesterday.’

‘And yesterday?’

He smiled. ‘Yesterday wasn’t so bad.’

‘I’m glad.’ *It’s good to be riding with you again*, she almost said. But that could imply more than she meant...or more than she really wanted to say right now.

‘These are good horses,’ Beko said, saving her. ‘You must know Pancet well.’

‘I know what he is,’ she replied. ‘And I know how to play men like him.’

‘He’s a thug.’

‘Yes. And a murderer, if all the stories are true.’

‘You know how to play murderers?’

Nomi looked across at Beko’s innocent smile. ‘Captain, are you trying word games with me already?’

‘Mam Hyden, I talk straight; you know that well.’

Nomi laughed.

Not long after setting out they entered Clyst Forest. It would take them until midday to ride through, and then the rest of their route out of Marrakash would be across the vast Clyst Plain: a hundred miles of grassland and moorland

rolling through valleys and over gentle hills. It was an easy ride, and the dangers were few. There were a dozen small settlements between here and the border with Pavissia Steppes, and they would have tracks to follow and farmsteads at which to stop and buy food. Marrakash always offered a gentle start to a voyage, and Nomi was glad of the gradual change.

The shadows closed around them, the trees grew high, and there was a pleasant chill to the air. Ferns grew between the trees, taller than a person in places, and they swayed in time with tune birds singing in harmony. Every song was different, and some claimed that the birds felt the same emotion a person would whilst listening. The song this morning was upbeat and bright.

There was a path through the woods – a much-travelled route worn down to the rock in places. Before long, they passed a group of people going the other way, the men carrying heavy baskets on their heads while the women bore tools and water skins.

‘Nolan berries?’ Beko asked.

The lead man carefully lowered his basket to the ground, nodding. He was sweating and breathing hard, but he offered a smile.

‘Can I buy some?’ Beko patted his stomach. ‘I’ve had breakfast, but nolan berries lose their freshness so quickly.’

‘Help yourself,’ the man said. ‘Good crop this year, and I’ll not take money for something you can pick a few hundred steps on.’ He lifted the basket back onto his head and leant against Beko’s horse.

Beko chose a dozen fat berries, handing a few to Nomi. ‘Good journeys.’

‘Same to you.’ The man and his party headed off.

Nomi plucked the remains of a stalk from a berry then ate it. She closed her eyes, luxuriating in the taste. It was sweet, juicy and rich, and she could hardly think of anything more perfect.

Beko ate a couple of berries then turned his horse, passing the rest to Rhiana behind them. ‘Pass them along,’ he said.

‘Should have taken a few more; they make a great filling for plain doves.’ Rhiana grinned at Nomi as she chewed, a dribble of juice speckling her chin.

‘Hey, Ramus!’ Nomi called. Ramus was at the back of the group, looking around calmly as they ate and chatted amongst themselves. ‘Come up and join us?’

He shook his head, smiled but said nothing.

‘Please yourself. But I’ll get there first!’

They moved deeper into the forest.

Nomi had not travelled this way in over a year, and when they came to the standing stones, she gasped in surprise.

The stones had always been there. There were nineteen of them; fifteen were arranged around the clearing in a rough circle, while four others stood beyond the circle at the four points of the compass. The glade was almost a hundred steps across, and at its centre lay a wide, flat rock with weathered carvings in its surface. Time had made most of the images impossible to discern, and the remaining indents were home to lichen. The stones were huge – the largest twice as high as a man and just as wide – and no one knew where they had come from, who had placed them, or how they had been manoeuvred through the forest. Their purpose was similarly vague. Temple, sacrificial altar, burial place of a Sleeping God

– all had been suggested. There had been digs over the years, but few people were really interested enough to spend much time here. Noreela, both known and unknown, was scattered with thousands of similarly intriguing sites.

This place had always appeared wild, primal and untouched; even the stone circle had seemed a part of the land, not the result of people upon it. But now all that had changed. The trees around the edge of the clearing were adorned with countless scraps of coloured cloth, some of them tied to lower branches or fixed to trunks, others hanging so high above the ground that whoever placed them there must have risked life and limb to do so. Blue, red and purple were the main colours, but amongst hundreds of these Nomi could also make out a few yellows, some greens and one or two black strips.

‘What’s this?’ she asked, perplexed and a little awed.

‘Remembrance trees,’ Beko said.

The colours felt right here, not intrusive, and as a breeze rustled leaves and strips of cloth alike, they felt like a true part of the forest.

‘I’ve seen remembrance trees before,’ she said. ‘But why here, so suddenly?’

Beko shrugged.

‘The sightings,’ Konrad said. ‘There are rumours of wraiths being seen here, starting last winter.’

‘I’ve not heard of that,’ Nomi said.

‘Then you don’t drink in the right taverns. I’ve heard the tale from a few people – Serians, traders, a mercenary – and it’s much the same whoever does the telling: the ghosts of children run here when the death moon’s full. They say they were sacrificed to the moon a long time ago. Though the

mercenary told me that the children are only recently dead. Still suffering their sacrifice, he said.’ Konrad grinned. ‘But then, he *was* very drunk.’

Nomi shivered. ‘So why do people suddenly see this as a place of remembrance if it’s so haunted?’

‘Maybe because it’s close to beyond,’ Ramus said. He had ridden up quietly on his horse, and now sat an arm’s stretch from Nomi. She wanted to touch him, but she was not sure how he would react.

‘I don’t like it,’ she said. ‘I did, but now I don’t.’ The strips decorating the stone circle clearing suddenly made her uneasy, and all she wanted to do was move on.

‘Different colours from different faiths,’ Ramus said. ‘Death moon, life moon, the land. Sleeping Gods.’

‘Which colour for them?’ Nomi asked.

‘I think probably the black ones.’

‘Shall we move on?’ Beko asked. ‘It will be good to get through the forest in time for lunch.’

They skirted around the clearing. It did not feel right to break the circle.

Nomi found herself riding alone. Beko went on ahead with Lulah, the short woman dwarfed by her huge horse, and she heard them talking in subdued tones. Behind her rode the other Serians, mostly in silence but sometimes responding to comments or jokes from Ramin. She was already warming to most of them – though Lulah seemed cold and distant – and she hoped Ramus would become more friendly. They would be spending a long time together as a group, and she would far prefer if it was on good terms.

Ramus still brought up the rear. Nomi glanced back now

and then, and Ramus's movement on his horse was awkward. He still had to find his rhythm. He'd be sore after today's ride. Nomi's thighs and rump were already warm from the unaccustomed exercise, but her movement had quickly fallen in tune with her horse, and she sensed that it was at ease with her. *Over a thousand miles*, she thought. It was seven hundred miles there, assuming they did not have to divert for anything. And coming back the same, and who knew what they may be carrying on their return journey? She clicked her tongue and the horse's ears twitched.

'So, I hear women make better Voyagers than men,' Rhiana said. She had ridden up beside Nomi and now kept pace, moving with grace and poise. Even the cruel angles and curves of her weapons did not seem out of place.

'Of course,' Nomi said. 'We don't have anything to prove.' She smiled, but Rhiana's grin did not seem all humour.

'Piss!' the Serian said. 'Everyone's got something to prove. But is it true? This is my third voyage, and the first two were with men.'

'How did they go?'

'First one was with a turd called Blaken...'

'I know him,' Nomi said, nodding slowly. *A turd indeed.*

'We went south across the Pavissia Steppes, heading for the unnamed lake at its southern edge. He wanted to camp on the shore and catalogue its flora and fauna. But he hadn't researched the route, or even planned how long the voyage would take. We ran into a band of steppe marauders, disturbed them attacking a farming village, and we lost three people.'

'Serians?'

'Two of my friends, and a woman from Long Marrakash, one of Blaken's soft friends. When we returned, it came out

that the marauders were known to be working in that area. Reports had filtered back from an earlier voyage, but Blaken had paid them no heed.'

'What happened?'

Rhiana touched her leather tunic, finger circling a patch of bare leather. 'Had a place just here for Blaken's stud. But Beko talked me out of it.'

'You're not the first Serian I've heard of who wanted Blaken's head. But good for Beko.'

The soldier offered a wry smile. 'I suppose so. Killing a Voyager wouldn't have put me in good favour with the Guild.'

'It would have got you executed, most likely.'

'Well. So, that was the first. The second was little better. I can't even remember his name, but he was nothing to speak of. Sailed us out to The Spine, dug up some plants, shot a few birds, sailed us back.'

'And now you're on a voyage with a man *and* a woman Voyager.'

'I am.' Rhiana glanced back over her shoulder, then leant across towards Nomi. Even then she rode with elegance, her long tied hair swinging down across her shoulder. 'He's a bit quiet,' she said.

'He does a lot of thinking.'

'And you?'

'What about me?'

'What's your drive?'

'To make women the best Voyagers, naturally.'

Rhiana stared at her for just too long. Then she grinned. 'I'll help,' she said. She rode on ahead and joined Beko and Lulah, and Nomi wondered exactly what she meant.

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To be continued at the next tour stop...
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