

## 8th STOP on the TIM LEBBON BLOG TOUR

Excerpt from **FALLEN, BY TIM LEBBON** (follows on from excerpt on Graeme's Fantasy Book Review)

FALLEN 85

When they passed the ruin, Nomi knew that they were almost out of the Clyst forest. The remains had stood here for as long as anyone could remember, and it was said that this had once been a temple to the Violet Dogs, a race of monstrous invaders that swarmed the Western Shores before history began. There was very little left now: a few scattered piles of carved building blocks, a heavy lintel half-buried in the soil, and one portion of a wall still standing. It was home to creeping vegetation and a colony of rock ants, weaving their sticky tube tunnels through grooves and cracks in the old stone.

Nomi had never paused to examine the ruin because it had never been her destination. She spared it a quick glance and noticed that it had been subsumed more by the forest since her last trip. The climbing plants' stems were slightly thicker, the lintel buried marginally deeper in the ground. A few more years and maybe this would become totally hidden, just another secret part of Clyst Forest that would fade from sight and memory until no one knew it was there.

She often wondered how many other such places had already disappeared.

She noticed Beko had paused ahead, Lulah and Rhiana just behind him. He turned around and caught her eye, and Nomi rode forward.

'Traders camped ahead,' he said.

The path through the forest was much wider here, the trees further apart. She could see movement between the trunks, and she caught the whiff of cooking meat and spices. 'Lunch,' she said.

'They're charm traders,' Beko said.

Rhiana spat. 'So long as they don't try charming me.'

Beko laughed, and Nomi felt momentarily excluded.

They moved on, rounding a slow bend and passing between the first of the traders.

A woman stood quickly from the woven mat she had been sitting on, holding out an array of fur tails. ‘Ward away the dark,’ she said, her voice tinged with the accent of the Pavissia Steppes. ‘Wood cat tails to ward away the dark.’

‘I just light a fire,’ Noon said, laughing.

A young boy skipped along the track trailing a length of string behind him, dried leaves from a poison cactus waving in the breeze. ‘Cure the ills in your head,’ he said, laughing manically. ‘Ill head! Ill head!’ the boy shouted, darting in dangerously close to Konrad’s horse.

‘Away!’ Konrad said. He kicked out, but the boy twisted aside easily.

More traders tried to parade their wares, dancing and singing, pleading and whispering, some of them saying nothing at all as they offered their products to view. There were petrified pieces of dead animals, plants, objects carved from wood or stone, fine clay pitchers of dark fluids, and one woman offered herself, pulling open her loose tunic to display heavy breasts and a stomach tattooed with swirling images.

They did not stop. Beko rode on and Nomi did not question his decision; there was a sense this could get ugly. When they had passed the traders Nomi turned around in her saddle to see how Ramus had reacted.

His horse stood abandoned, and Ramus was kneeling beside an old woman and her display of rope charms.

‘What in the name of all the gods...?’ Nomi paused and let the Serians ride by, only Ramin offering her a tight smile.

‘Your friend in need of some help from beyond?’ he asked.

‘Not Ramus, no.’ She shook her head. *At least*, she thought,

*not the old Ramus.* But this was no longer the Ramus of old, was it? This was a new man, with a terrible new illness which he probably still believed nobody else knew about...

Ramus stood, dug into his jacket pocket and dropped some coins into the old woman's hand. She held his fingers and closed her eyes, then snatched up a rope charm from her extensive display. It was the length of her forearm, the knot in the middle thick and complex, and it had been dyed dark purple.

'I wonder what charm that one hides?' Nomi muttered. These were intricate knots, inside which the enchantments were supposedly trapped, expelled as a whisper from the charm breather. Untie the knot and the charm is released.

Ramus mounted his horse and kneed it on, approaching Nomi slowly. The old woman watched him go, then locked eyes with Nomi, her expression cold and hostile.

Nomi waited until Ramus drew close before speaking. 'You and a cheap charm trick, Ramus?'

He rode past her without a look. 'I'm interested, and there's no harm there,' he said.

'I know you. Interested you may be, but you'd never line the palm of a charlatan. You'd sooner steal it from her.'

'Who's to say who's a charlatan, and who is a true charm breather?'

She shook her head, incredulous and confused, then clicked her tongue and urged her horse onward. Now Nomi was at the end of the line.

They camped a mile beyond the forest. The Serians dismounted with ease, but as Nomi slipped from her saddle she realised just how much she'd lost the feel of riding. Her legs and rear ached, and her back, arms and shoulders

were stiff from being constantly tensed.

‘Got to ease up if you’re going to make seven hundred miles,’ Beko said. ‘We’ve come about fifteen so far.’

‘Well then, not far to go,’ Nomi said. She gave him a sweet smile, which he laughed at before going back to his horse.

Ramus approached, his face a mask of discomfort. ‘I forgot how much horses hate me,’ he said. ‘I think my balls are going to drop off.’

‘Thank you so much for that information,’ Nomi said.

Ramus smiled and nodded at the Serians. They were gathered a short distance away, drinking from their skins and talking quietly amongst themselves. ‘They seem quite tight,’ he said.

‘I think they’ve voyaged together several times before. Beko called them his team, and I think they respect him as a captain.’

‘Good.’ He wanted to say something else, Nomi was sure. He stretched his arms and tried to massage feeling back into his legs, but he kept glancing up at her.

‘What?’ she asked.

Ramus shook his head and chuckled. ‘Am I that transparent?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fine.’ He brought the rope charm from inside his jacket. ‘Don’t tell me to piss off until I’ve finished what I’m about to say, because—’

‘Piss off.’

He stared at Nomi without smiling, and she suddenly felt uncomfortable. *He’s serious*, she thought. *And I just made fun.*

‘I bought this for you,’ he said.

Nomi's shock was such that she could not speak.

'We're voyaging into darkness,' he said, voice dropping to a whisper. 'I truly feel this. And though I know it's all about journeying into the unknown, I believe that we're heading for the unknowable. And I'm scared, Nomi. More frightened than I ever have been before. And I...' He put his hand to his eyes, rubbing above them as if suffering a headache. 'I wanted to give you a charm. You know I don't believe in shit like that, but it doesn't matter what I believe. If you believe, and it may help, then that's my aim fulfilled.'

'Ramus... I'm not sure what to say.'

'Well, take it first, at the very least.'

She took the rope charm from him. It was much heavier than it looked, as though the knot contained more rope than was possible. 'Thank you.'

'The idea is to—'

'I know. Untie the knot if I feel it's needed.'

Ramus smiled and turned away, heading off to talk to Beko.

Nomi turned her back on the rest of the team, blinking back tears that stung her eyes. *What am I?* she thought. *And what have I done? Whatever sickens him should have been mine.*

A tear ran down her cheek. She rubbed it away in case anyone saw its mark in the trail dust.

Ramus woke, the world crashing in around him in sound and smell, feel and taste. Grass and heather scratched at his hands and the exposed skin at the back of his neck, the smell of cooking meat assailed his nostrils, and he could hear the genial banter of the Serians. He smelt hot horses and humans perspiring in early afternoon sun.

He kept his eyes squeezed shut because the pain was so bad.

*There are no children chasing us.* He had dreamt of swarms of children pursuing them across the hillsides, picking off the Serians one by one and slaughtering them with hooked hands, and behind each child had fluttered a length of black cloth.

The nightmare was already fading, yet the pain still throbbed hard behind his eyes, as though the children really had caught him, pummelling down on his forehead with their tiny clenched fists while the black remembrance strips flittered around their arms.

He opened his eyes a crack and allowed in some light. It felt better than he had expected, and he slowly pushed himself into a sitting position, looking around at where they had stopped for lunch.

He couldn't have been asleep for long. Rhiana was kneeling beside a fire, stripping and gutting a couple of small rabbits. She worked with casual ease, no hint of distaste on her face at what she was doing. Guts and innards she dropped into a patch of ground where the sod had been lifted, and she used a small, sharp knife to cut off chunks of meat. She skewered these on two long metal spikes, placed them on brackets above the fire, then glanced over at Ramus.

'Nice sleep?' she said.

Ramus nodded, not trusting himself to answer.

'Smell of my cooking bring you awake?'

He nodded again.

'I do the best spiced rabbit stew you've ever tasted, but that'll wait for an evening. Quick stop for now, your friend tells us, so for now it's just roasted steaks. Good for you?'

Ramus smiled, surprised at the rumbles in his stomach. 'Sounds very good to me.'

Rhiana stood and walked over to him, squatting down and

leaning over to whisper some secret. 'Best spices for rabbit aren't violet skin and shred, like most will tell you. You know what they are?'

'Haven't got a clue,' Ramus said. 'Buy mine from street traders, and I don't know what they use at all.'

'Street traders,' Rhiana said, with disgust in her voice. 'For every good one, there are a dozen that don't know how to cook, let alone serve food at its best. I'll tell you, Ramus – best spice for roasting rabbit is porl root.'

'That's poisonous!' Ramus said.

'It is. Eat porl root and your guts will tie up, you'll puke blood and crap like the Violet Dogs themselves are after you! But if you use the porl root tendrils, they're not yet poisonous. Too deep, lots of water passing through them. Beat them, dry them and strip the brown flesh out of them, and they give you the best spice for rabbit you have ever tasted.'

'I'll take your word for it.'

'No you won't,' she said. 'You'll try it.'

Ramus looked at Rhiana's serious expression and burst out laughing. It felt good, driving down the memory of the dream and bringing him back to the present.

Rhiana walked away towards the fire and Ramus could not help admiring the shape of her as she went. *All this fresh air getting to me*, he thought. Beneath the aroma of roasting rabbit and hot horses there was the brisk, heady scent of the open plains. It all smelt good.

Rhiana took a leather pouch from one pocket, grinned at Ramus, and sprinkled generous pinches of dried white spice over the rabbit. The meat's juices were already running from the heat and the spices stuck, burning into the flesh and sending their rich, warm scent into the air.

*Fresh air*, he thought again. Half a day out from Long Marrakash and he felt different already. More alive.

Ironic, when the pain behind his eyes was giving him such horrendous nightmares.

They ate, and it was the best roast rabbit Ramus had ever tasted. Juicy, tender, rich, and the spice brought out the flavour and added a delicious heat that dwelt long after he'd finished the final mouthful.

'That,' Nomi said, 'was pissing good food. You cook like that for the rest of the voyage, Rhiana, and—'

'Wait,' the tall Serian said, holding up her hand. 'It's Konrad's turn to cook this evening.'

'But he makes everything taste like dust!' Ramin protested.

'Good food's bad for the soul,' Konrad said, but he could not keep a straight face.

'Rhiana's the best,' Noon protested. 'Why put up with anything else? Rhiana, I'm pleading with you, hang up your sword and take up the skewer. We'll split the pay with you just the same. Please!' He knelt and clasped his hands before his face, mimicking the moon worshippers who grasped moonlight between their palms to honour their gods.

'My favourite way of killing an enemy,' Rhiana said, 'is to fire a bolt into his spine, then slit his throat. That way he's paralysed, but he sees the knife coming.'

Silence fell for a moment, then Ramin said, 'And I bet you could even make an enemy taste good.'

'You said "his" throat?' Nomi said.

Rhiana shrugged. '*Most* of the people I've killed have been men.'

More silence. Ramus always found such talk uncomfortable.

He had seen fighting and he had fought, but for him it always marked an extreme moment, a time stamped into memory by its viciousness. For these people it was more a way of life, and he had to remind himself of that. The Serians were not just along for the ride. They were here to fight and kill if necessary, and if things went badly wrong some of them could die.

*Oh, they will,* he thought. *They'll go badly wrong, and some of those sitting around the fire will be dead.* He looked from face to face, feeling very distant. *Noon? Maybe. Konrad? He's scarred, already marked from violence, so yes. Rhiana?*

He did not like the idea of any of these soldiers dying on his voyage, but Rhiana felt different. He had spoken to the others, but *she* had chosen to speak to *him*. Perhaps as the voyage went on she could even become a friend.

Beko stood and stretched. 'Good food, Rhiana. Konrad, your turn to cook for us tonight. Dust will do fine. Let's move on. I want to make the Lowkie farmstead by nightfall.'

Everyone stood and started gathering their eating utensils. Rhiana emptied the remaining scraps of food – bones, skin and gristle – into the small hole she'd made, then stomped the sod back over it. She kicked out the fire and spread the ashes, then glanced up at Ramus watching her.

Ramus smiled.

Rhiana prodded a thumb between her breasts and drew a finger slowly across her throat. Then she laughed and turned away. Ramus shook his head, picked up his backpack and went to where Nomi was retying straps across her saddle.

'That food was something to remember,' he said.

'I can still taste it,' Nomi said. 'Rhiana though...she's a strange one.'

‘Lots of Serians are.’ Ramus helped Nomi tie a pack onto her saddle.

‘It’s going to be a long voyage,’ Nomi said.

‘Longest ever. For us, at least.’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

Ramus shrugged. ‘Lots of Voyagers have gone missing over the years. At the Guild, I once heard a count of over three hundred. Who’s to say some of them aren’t still travelling, somewhere?’

She looked at him intently, eyelids fluttering as happened when she was angry or confused. ‘That’s not going to happen to us, Ramus.’

Ramus noticed the rope charm he’d given Nomi hanging from her saddle, tied within easy reach. *She hasn’t packed it away*, he thought. He looked up at her but she did not meet his eye.

**END OF FREE EXCERPTS FROM FALLEN**

**To be continued...**

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