

### 3rd STOP on the TIM LEBBON BLOG TOUR

Excerpt from **FALLEN, BY TIM LEBBON** (follows on from excerpt on Allison&Busby Blog)

FALLEN 39

The tavern was still boarded up, and a drunk lay unconscious on its steps. Nomi thought of waking him and telling him that dawn had come and gone, but he did not look like the sort of man who'd take kindly to being surprised. There was a short curved knife in his belt, the blade keen, bone handle smooth and darkened from use.

She stepped over his splayed legs, cringing at the smell, and walked down the short flight of stone steps to the basement door.

It was open, and Beko Havison was smiling at her.

'Beko! You surprised me.'

'You come to visit, and *I* surprise *you*?'

'How by all the gods do you live here?' she asked. The drunk growled something indecipherable in his sleep.

'Nobody looks below a tavern,' Beko said. 'Makes me anonymous. Besides, it's not so bad here. A rough place, but the food is to die for.' He held out his hands and Nomi grasped them. 'Good travels.'

Nomi grinned. 'I hope so.'

'Ah!' Beko said. 'Work. Then welcome to my humble abode.'

The basement consisted of one huge room with a curtained bathroom in one corner and a large bed along one side. With the front door closed, the only outside light came from three slits just below ceiling level – one at the front and two at the rear. They were glazed with thick, misted glass, and dust on the outside further reduced the light. Candles flickered around the room, casting dancing shadows. The ceiling beams were low enough that the warrior had to duck in places.

All available wall space was taken up by weaponry.

‘Very homely,’ Nomi said.

‘I have to store the tools of my trade somewhere.’

There were a dozen swords of varying shapes, lengths and designs. Several bows hung on the walls, the smallest the length of Nomi’s arm, the longest as tall as the room. A collection of intricately designed quivers lay on the long table along the room’s rear wall, and there were tall wooden pots from which the feathered ends of hundreds of arrows protruded like deadly flowers. Knives made from metal, bone and hardwood hung on strings, along with an assortment of other cutting, crushing or hacking weapons. She could also see the crossbow with which Beko had hunted fowl and wild pigs in Ventgoria.

Nomi shivered. She could not help wondering which blades, arrows and axes had killed people.

She knew that Beko had killed. They had talked about it. Hers was the most trouble-free voyage he had been on, he had told her. The one previous to that had been with a woman named Ghina Bleed, one of the most senior Voyagers of the Guild. They had gone south as far as the great lake south of the Pavissia Steppes, and whilst mapping the lake’s shores, they had been besieged by a large, organised band of marauders, coveting the Voyagers’ horses, equipment and weapons. The fight had lasted for eight days, and when the marauders finally fled, they left behind a hundred dead. How many of those Beko was responsible for he had not said, but Nomi did not believe that numbers really mattered. The voyage lost only four members, and it had become infamous in Guild history.

‘Drink?’ Beko asked.

Nomi’s head was still spinning from her unaccustomed

intake of morning cydrax. She shook her head and watched Beko pour himself some root wine from a tall clay bottle.

‘Please, sit,’ the soldier said. He sat in one of the chairs around a low table and Nomi sat opposite, relaxing. ‘Remember I promised I would show you this?’ He indicated the table, shifting aside a plate dirtied with leftover food.

‘Your trial carving!’ Nomi leant forward and gasped when she saw the table’s hardwood surface. ‘Is that your seethe-gator?’

Beko nodded.

She touched the carving, and for an instant Nomi imagined the rough wooden edges to be seethe-gator teeth. She moved her fingertips across the deadly creature’s image – its spines and serrated teeth, those long, hooked limbs which made it so deadly – and then she noticed the flicker of a figure beside it. It was so expertly carved that the candlelight revealed only its shadow: ridges and knots cut here and there to form the insubstantial image of a man. The seethe-gator was twice his size.

‘I took it with nineteen throwing knives, fifteen arrows, six crossbow bolts, and a sword for its head.’

Nomi shook her head in awe. ‘How can you and your people live in such a place?’

‘My people have lived there for ever,’ he said. ‘Mancoseria is our home, and the seethe-gators have always been there, too. Yet for me...I don’t live there anymore. I live here.’

‘Of course,’ Nomi said. ‘I’m sorry. I—’

‘It was a long time ago. And that was the creature that took her. I killed it. I’ve had my revenge. It’s not every Serian who gets to kill such a seethe-gator for their trial.’

Nomi sat back, amazed once again at the soldier’s history.

So much death, such harsh times. She tried to picture Beko fighting the terrifying animal carved in the tabletop.

'I'd like to offer you work,' she said at last.

'But not Guild work.' Beko rested his feet on the trial table, heels crossed atop the seethe-gator's head.

'No, not Guild. There are...reasons. And it would be myself and a friend.'

'Ramus Rheel?'

'Yes.' She'd forgotten how sharp Beko could be.

He nodded slowly, looking at her over the top of his mug.

*What did I tell him about Ramus and me?* She could not remember. They had spent many nights eating around campfires, and their discovery of Ventgorian airbacco had turned much of the voyage hazy and indistinct.

'He's a remarkable man,' she said. 'He reads, and not just the modern Norelan languages. He's read *old* books, too. He knows so much, and for this voyage—'

'So it *is* a voyage. You were being a bit evasive, Nomi. It's not like you.'

'True. But with this one, there's nothing defined or known.'

Beko leant forward and placed his mug on the table. 'The very soul of voyaging.'

'Are you interested?'

'I'm intrigued,' he said. 'Which for me, amounts to the same thing. I've been here for almost half a year without a voyage. And the last one was with that fool Geary, a tiresome stomp down the Western Shores. We found nothing but sand and dead fish.'

'I'll want you as captain.'

He frowned. 'How many more Serians do you need?'

'Can you find five more who'll do private work?'

He nodded. 'Of course. But what do I tell them?'

'Nothing for now.' She looked down at Beko's trial table again, and the shifting candlelight made the seethe-gator move. 'Only promise them the voyage of a lifetime.'

'Well,' Beko said, picking his mug up and drinking more wine. 'I'm more intrigued than ever.'

Nomi caught him staring at her when she looked up.

'This needs to be kept quiet, Beko. I mean it.'

'I'm sure.' He smiled. 'But as captain, I think I deserve something to spur me on. Don't you?'

'Something...?' Not for the first time, Nomi felt uncomfortable in Beko's presence. He was a big man, intimidating when he wanted to be, yet gentle and caring when the mood took him. A man of contradictions; a lover of poetry who slept in an armoury.

'Tell me where we're going, Nomi.'

'That's your price?'

'I won't breathe a word.'

Nomi relaxed back into the chair. 'We're going to the Great Divide.'

The soldier's face did not change, but his eyes grew dark.

'The voyage of voyages, Beko! Perhaps the one to end them all.'

'What's down there?'

She looked away. 'We don't know yet.'

'You're lying.'

'I don't lie, Beko. We *don't* know what's down there. That's why we're going.'

He stood and walked behind her, a heavy shadow in the shady basement. In the tavern above them a piece of furniture scraped across the floor. Someone muttered, and somebody

else laughed. 'Opening time soon,' Beko said. 'More drinking in the day, singing in the evening, and fighting in the night. More wine dripping between the floorboards. More puking drunks.'

'We could be drinking around a campfire two nights from now.'

'I'll come, of course,' Beko said. 'I made up my mind when I showed you my trial table.'

'You did?'

'I saw the excitement in your eyes. You don't hide much.'

She sighed with relief, but said, 'You haven't even asked about pay.'

Beko turned. He was holding a round stone, and he drew the blade of a short knife across its surface. 'I know that Ventgorian fruit has made you rich. Come back this evening and I'll give you a price.'

Nomi nodded, and jumped when something thudded onto the floor above them.

Beko rolled his eyes. 'Dragging out last night's drunks to make room for tonight's.'

'Yes. Very homely.' Nomi went to the door and opened it to the smell of vomit.

'Nomi,' Beko said.

She turned around, looking back into the cavern of a room.

'Thank you for asking me.'

'Who else would I go to?' Then she shut the door, climbed the steps into the street and went to find a runner.

## CHAPTER TWO

Ramus sat just inside the library entrance, holding his head and hissing as the pain receded. His vision and hearing throbbed with each heartbeat, but the nausea was passing.

*Not now*, he thought. *Not while I need all my wits about me*. He grasped the rolled parchment pages in his left hand, and they too seemed to pulse with each beat of his heart.

It had started as a headache three years ago, one that lasted four days and seemed to reach out to every nerve in his body, drowning him in a pain he had never imagined before. He had thrashed and cried in his bed, unable to move or go for help. Even back then, Nomi was the only person who ever paid him a visit, and then not frequently, but she had been away on her second voyage to Ventgoria. He had suffered alone, and recovered without telling anyone what had happened. *One of those things*, he had thought at the time. *A sickness in the air, or bad food from one of the street vendors*. Looking back, he now considered it the period of impregnation, because every time an attack came he had visions: strange, obscure, sometimes disturbing, and other times quite mundane.

Ramus stood, resting his right hand against the wall for support. He gasped in a few deep breaths, trying to clear his head, and smelt the unmistakable must of age. This library was his home from home. He stood still for a few moments, feeling the last of the pain drift away, and then he reached for the library's inner door.

There were three other people at the tables immediately inside. One of them worked for the Guild, and she nodded at Ramus. He recognised the other two by sight, although he did not know their names. Scholars, probably, working for themselves or one of the local Chieftains. They scratched at rough paper on the tables before them, taking notes from a book here, a parchment there, and the frown of confusion on their faces was ever-present.

*They don't know how to look, Ramus thought. They may think they can understand language, but everything that matters is between the lines.*

The library was contained in a large, low hall behind a shop selling furniture, paintings, and exotic tapestries from Pengulfin Landing. It had been a storage building many years before, and the ranks of rough timber shelves were still there, free-standing down the middle of the hall and fixed to all four walls. When one of the old Chieftains of Long Marrakash had decided to gather as many books, scrolls and parchments together as they could, the shop's owner had sold the hall for a good price. The books and other recordings had been gathered and moved in, and since then this had been a virtual shrine to all those who strove to know the past. It was also a place of much frustration, as few books were written in exactly the same language. Most utilised some common

Noreelan lettering, but each writer had adapted the language to their own aims, using symbolism, unique dialects, graphical representations, imagery known and unknown, and preferences that often amounted to personal code.

Ramus walked towards the rear of the hall, passing the Burned Past. When the library was first gathered, a group of shamans came one night and tried to burn it down. They destroyed a thousand books before they were stopped, and the library keeper had left the damaged shelving as he had found it, a sort of shrine to all that lost history. It pained Ramus every time he saw it, because it represented knowledge that could never be regained.

There was no one else sitting at the tables and chairs at the back of the hall. He breathed a sigh of relief and sat down, closing his eyes as he let the smell and feel of the place envelop him. He loved it here. So much potential, so much history, and he was quite certain that many of these books, if translated correctly, would change the world as they knew it today.

*And so could these*, he thought, looking at the parchments. He smoothed them out on the table and spread them so he could see all three at once.

He did not recognise much of the lettering, although some of the root formations looked vaguely familiar. What he *had* seen – and he was certain that Nomi had not spotted this – was that the symbols and strange lettering were contained within defined borders. There was no way of telling whether or not the pages were supposed to follow one another, or even in which order, but each page displayed one fundamental similarity: a thick, vertical line dividing the page into a space taken up by writing and an area of blankness.

Ramus saw this as partial proof that these pages had come

from the Divide. And whoever had written them had acknowledged one of the elemental aspects to their existence: the cliff. One side there was life, the other side only open air.

He looked at the curled figure at the bottom edge of one page, like a serpent twisted into an egg. *You know what that is*, Nomi had said. He had seen and read much about the Sleeping Gods, and though descriptions of those mysterious deities varied hugely, this was a recurring image he'd seen in a handful of texts.

Usually, the gods were drawn as beautiful winged creatures. Not lizards or snakes.

He stood and went to one of the shelves, glancing around to make sure nobody could see the parchments. A sudden sickness rumbled in his stomach, and he recognised this for what it was: fear. Because as well as words and texts, he thought that much of what appeared on these parchment pages was more literal.

Part of it, including the curled image of a Sleeping God, seemed to be a map.

The first book he chose was a heavy tome, loosely bound with twisted gut ties and covered front and back with thin wooden covers. It had no title or name, and there was no indication anywhere inside about who had written it, nor when or where.

Ramus guessed it was maybe five hundred years old. Some of the glyphs used were similar to several other volumes from around that time. He had referred to this book several times over the years, and there was one page in particular that had jumped into his memory.

It took a while to find the page he wanted, inked on a rough

sheet of layered silk-grass. The image there was, as he remembered, quite similar to that on the wanderer's parchment: a curled, serpent-like creature, only this one had a larger head, several limbs and hands. Each hand had six digits, and each digit was a person. Every person was screaming.

Ramus tried to read some of the glyphs around the image. He had never translated this page, though he had seen the glyphs used before, and it took him a while to edge his concentration in the right direction.

*Fallen One put down, he read. Down is the Fallen One. Deep is the god that Fell.* All saying the same thing in differing ways – and the more he read, the more he imagined a sense of panic overwhelming the writer. There was no information here; it was more like a statement of belief, a desire that would become more real the more it was written.

Every story he had read of the Sleeping Gods had sprouted from the solid foundation that the gods were benevolent, but extremely powerful. Some could move mountains, others were mountains themselves. Mention of a Fallen God was infrequent, a myth within a myth – one of those ancient gods gone insane and fallen from grace, its wings torn from their roots and the god itself buried deep in the land by the other Sleeping Gods. Those few times he *had* read about it, the language had been as frantic as this.

*Superstition*, he thought. Ramus liked to think of himself as a pragmatist with an open mind, but this was a tale designed to scare children at bedtime. That it managed to trouble him illustrated its power.

He reached for another page of the parchment. This one had a more regular spread of lettering and glyphs, and across

its centre were images that looked like statues. Some were obviously people, with arms raised, heads thrown back, and mouths open. Others looked more like representations of people – vaguely humanoid shapes with extended necks, tall, thin heads, and arms that reached below their knees. These were drawn as frozen, or dancing, or perhaps paying worship to the other, more human statues. There was writing all around these images, and though Ramus recognised none of the lettering, he could already discern a pattern.

The third parchment was damaged and darkened, and some of the stains could have been blood. It was covered in fine writing, using the same unknown language as the other pages, and interspersed here and there were images of the sun, moons and stars. Each image had a face, and the faces all had teeth.

Ramus closed his eyes and leant back in his chair. Footsteps came close and he sat up quickly, turning the parchments over so they could not be seen. Nobody appeared, and he waited until the footsteps retreated again to the front of the library before turning the pages back over.

He looked at those thick lines once more, dividing the pages into thirds and two-thirds, the spaces to their left blank and sterile as if no ink would take there, no thoughts could hold weight.

*These are real*, he thought, his heart pummelling his chest and sweat beading on his forehead. He could pass the parchments over to the Guild, but then news would spread. Or they could go themselves – he and Nomi – to see if they could find what these pages alluded to. But the risks were great.

One thing of which he was certain: if they could prove that

the Great Divide did not rise endlessly, this would be the greatest voyage ever.

And if there was evidence of a Sleeping God up there, then they would change Noreela.

He closed his eyes and wondered what to do.

On her way home Nomi called in to the runners' rooms. She sent a runner to Pancet's Stables south of the city, with an order and promise token for ten good horses, riding and camping equipment, and all the climbing gear Pancet could procure in the next day and night. She deflected queries about why she was not going to the Guild with a handful of coins. The runners needed to make a living as well, and they were known for their honesty.

Then she returned home, readying herself to say goodbye. She lived in the hills above the river, her home one of twenty in a structure built around a central courtyard. In the courtyard were several young weeping trees growing from a small pond, and ducks and frogs made the high grasses and reeds their home. It was not a cheap place to live, but Nomi had the money. She'd been through a lot on her voyages, and she saw no shame in profiting from her travels. Let Ramus frown upon her all he wished. If it weren't for her, they wouldn't be able to undertake the journey they were planning right now.

Still, as she entered her home a moment of doubt assailed her. *Should I really have told Ramus about this? I could have gone on my own, perhaps with Ten as companion.* But the Great Divide was a huge distance to travel for a fool's treasure. She needed Ramus's wisdom, his knowledge of language and the printed histories of words, to tell whether the parchments were real.

To be continued at the next tour stop...  
17th May on Falcata Times