

6th STOP on the TIM LEBBON BLOG TOUR

Excerpt from **FALLEN, BY TIM LEBBON** (follows on from excerpt on Speculative Horizons)

FALLEN 69

‘Keep still and quiet and you’ll see the sunset,’ the voice said.

Ramus did as he was told. He did not know the voice, though he knew the sharp accent, the words quick and clipped. Mancoserian.

‘Down on your knees.’

Ramus knelt and felt his weapon roll pulled away, untied and rolled out.

‘Going for a long walk, eh?’

‘A ride,’ Ramus said. ‘With Nomi Hyden.’

‘And who’ll you be?’

‘Ramus Rheel.’

The man behind him grunted, not without humour. ‘Good enough. Up, then, so I can introduce myself.’

Ramus turned as he stood, and smiled. ‘I know you already,’ he said. ‘Nomi’s talked about you.’

‘Beko Havison,’ the big Serian said. He held out his hands, and Ramus grabbed them.

‘Good travels,’ Ramus said.

‘Let’s hope so, eh? So we’re to work together at last, on this voyage that isn’t.’

‘Oh, it’s a voyage, believe me. Just because the Guild isn’t involved...’

Beko waved his hand. ‘They’re a bunch of old pissers, though they do have money.’

‘They have purpose, too,’ Ramus said. ‘Don’t discard them entirely. So, has Nomi told you where we’re going?’

‘She has, though none of my Serians know yet. She suggested it should be kept quiet.’

Ramus looked at the soldier, and he had already decided that he liked him. Most Serians he found gruff and serious,

and he still found their tradition of studding their leather tunics with a metal star for each kill troubling. Beko had many stars and carried an array of weaponry, but he seemed good-natured. And Ramus could read character well enough to know that it was not just eagerness to please.

‘They can know soon enough. Once we’re away from Marrakash, everyone can know.’

Nomi was there already. When Ramus held out his hands to wish her good journeys, she brushed them aside and hugged him hard. For a heartbeat he did not respond, but then he returned the gesture.

‘These are great times,’ she whispered in his ear.

All great times are painted in blood. But he smiled and nodded, and when she let go he had a chance to look around at their team.

Beko and five other Serians were helping Pancet’s men load their gear on the horses. There was a mount for each of them and two spare, shorter, stockier packhorses with thick legs and wide bodies to carry their loads. The Serians had selected a horse each and were standing close by, some of them whispering to their mounts as they loaded their gear. He saw weapon rolls everywhere, and each Serian was already dressed in their usual garb of thin woollen trousers, heavy boots and leather tunics. All colours were neutral, intended to act as camouflage in whatever terrains they may be crossing. Each carried the usual array of knives and short swords on wide belts around their waists, and three of them had bows strapped across their saddles. There were also several crossbow cases still waiting to be loaded, and some other equipment which Ramus did not recognise.

‘So what do you think?’ Nomi asked. ‘You’ve met Beko, yes?’

Ramus smiled. ‘He seems pleasant enough.’

‘He is,’ Nomi nodded, glancing away when Ramus caught her eye. He felt a pang of jealousy, sharp as it was unexpected. ‘He’s a good captain, his Serians respect him and I’ve worked with him before. He comes recommended by others, too, and I’ve never heard bad words about him. You know how some of these Serians can get.’

Ramus nodded. Some Serians were occasionally prone to fits of temper, and sometimes rage. He’d never witnessed it himself, but he’d heard tales from Voyagers who had undertaken longer trips. He put it down to the normal pressures that any long journey would present; he’d heard of Voyagers losing their minds, as well. He tried not to judge a person by their faults, but by their qualities.

‘Ramus!’ Beko called, beckoning him over. ‘Please, come and meet my people.’

Besides Beko, there were three other men and two women. None of them looked like someone Ramus would want to pick a fight with.

‘Noon,’ Beko said. Ramus grasped hands with the short, stocky man and wished good journeys.

‘Unusual name,’ Ramus said.

Noon nodded. ‘The time of day I killed my seethe-gator.’

A tall woman appeared by Ramus’s side, arriving like a shadow. ‘I’m Rhiana. Sharpshooter with a bow, more kills than anyone here, and a great cook.’

‘She does do an impressive spiced rabbit stew,’ Beko said, smiling.

Ramus held hands with Rhiana, examining her tunic. There

were too many star studs to count, but he guessed thirty. 'Impressive,' he said.

Rhiana smiled. 'Thank you.' Her voice was cool and betrayed nothing.

'Over here are Konrad and Ramin,' Beko said. 'They're cousins, hence the similarity.'

Ramus nodded at Konrad, trying not to let his surprise show. The left side of the man's face was raised in a dozen ugly circular ridged scars, each of them the width of a thumbnail. He held out his hands and the men shook.

'Striking scars,' Ramus said. Not mentioning them would be false, and he did not want to set off the wrong way with any of these Serians. Over the course of the voyage, it was likely he'd rely on them to protect his life.

Konrad smiled, but the scar tissue pulled it into a grimace. 'You should have seen the 'gator.'

Ramin sighed and clapped Ramus on the shoulder. He was tall, dark-skinned and completely bald, and he looked nothing at all like Konrad. 'The 'gator was a baby,' he said. 'My cousin always likes to talk himself up. You have to forgive him, he can be...' He touched the side of his head and rolled his eyes.

'Rat piss, Ramin,' Konrad said.

Ramin laughed, startling the horses. 'Ramus, give me your bags and I'll load up your mount.'

Beko touched Ramus's arm and inclined his head. He frowned slightly before he spoke. 'And over here, meet Lulah.'

The short, slight Serian woman was strapping her gear to a huge sand-coloured horse. She had long beaded hair, skin the colour of Cantrassan chocolate and delicate hands. She

glanced over her shoulder, and Ramus blinked back his surprise. She only had one eye. The other socket was covered by a brown leather patch, seemingly sewn into the skin and studded with one large metal star.

‘Good journeys,’ Ramus said, holding out his hands.

Lulah continued tightening the straps around a weapon roll, giving no sign that she had heard.

‘Lulah?’ Beko said, and the captain’s voice was almost a plea.

Is he really in charge here? Ramus thought.

The woman turned fully and stared at Ramus. She looked him up and down with her one good eye – it was a startling gold colour, contrasting against her skin like the sun rising at night – and then stepped forward. Her expression did not change. ‘Good journeys, Ramus,’ she said, holding out her hands. They shook and she pulled away, turning back to her horse and continuing to load her gear.

Ramus swapped glances with Nomi. *Some stories to hear from that one*, he thought. He wondered who or what she had killed to get the stud in her eyepatch.

A huge man walked down the slope towards them. He carried a leg of some unidentifiable meat, chewing as he came, smiling through the grease and scraps of skin that clung to his beard. Several children hovered around him, eyeing the group of Serians with a mixture of awe and fear.

‘Have you ever seen a group of finer horses?’ the man said, spreading his arms as if to hug them all.

‘Pancet, you’ve done me proud,’ Nomi said. ‘And all on a promise slip.’

‘A promise from you is as good as its word, Nomi.’

Nomi was smiling, and Ramus was surprised at how this

man's charms affected her. He'd heard stories about Pancet, and not many of them were good.

Pancet chewed at his meat again, eyes straying over the rest of the group. They rested a little too long on Rhiana and Lulah, and Ramus could not help smiling. *I'd like to see him try.* 'An interesting group,' the horse-trader said. 'Long voyage, Mam Hyden?'

'Just a little trip into the wilds.'

'Which wilds would they be, then?'

Nomi's wide smile was still there. *She's so good, Ramus thought. So good that she sometimes fools me.*

'Just a jaunt,' she said. 'A trip, a walk, a ride through fields and pastures new, forests perhaps, some mountains and marshes and a few boat trips in between.'

'Can't help being curious,' Pancet said.

'I have your money, if you have my promise slip,' Nomi said. The smile had slipped at last.

'You like the horses?' he asked, ignoring her outstretched hand.

'They're perfect,' Nomi said. 'Well kept and healthy.'

'The runner you sent said not to give you any old nags.'

'Then she passed on my message well.'

'I don't keep nags, Mam Hyden. And if I did, I wouldn't sell them to you.' Pancet's voice had fallen in tone and volume, and the hand holding the meat was swinging by his side. The children hiding around his legs moved away, rushing back up the hill and giggling amongst themselves.

Nomi shrugged. 'The Guild uses other breeders as well, and sometimes they're not as scrupulous as you.'

'Scrupulous,' Pancet said. He smiled. 'Good word to describe me.' He looked at Ramus again, and the Serians

standing beside their horses. 'Yes, quite a voyage I'm sure.'

'I have your money,' Nomi said, patting her chest pocket. 'And your silence is worth a little extra, if you'd like to discuss it with me in private.'

Don't pay the fat turd a piece more, Ramus thought. He knew that Nomi was not one to be bullied, but he hated the idea that this hoodlum would gain from their need.

Pancet smiled. 'I think not. That would be...unscrupulous of me.'

Nomi inclined her head but did not respond.

'And you're Ramus,' Pancet said, his attention shifting. 'I know of you. Wise man, a reader. And I know Beko Havison, too.' He turned and looked at the Serian women again, a small smile turning his lips. 'So, on your way Nomi. I never saw you.'

'I'm grateful,' Nomi said, taking a money folder from her pocket. Pancet dug in his own voluminous pockets and brought out a twist of cloth, the promise token Nomi must have sent with the runner.

Nomi and Pancet concluded their business and the fat man turned, sauntering back up the hill and opening his arms to welcome his herd of children once again. They jumped at him, laughed and darted between his legs, and he ruffled their hair.

'We need to move out quickly,' Ramus said to Nomi. 'First chance he gets he'll be spreading word about us.'

'Why should he?'

Beko joined them, signalling his Serians to mount up. 'Because he's a bully,' he said, 'and he couldn't bully our destination from you.'

'You've dealt with him before?' Ramus asked.

'Several times. He's not a nice man.'

'I've heard the tales.' Ramus nodded across the yard at a round stone structure. 'Rumour has it his first three wives are rotting down that well.'

'Nice,' Nomi said. 'And now that you've both convinced me, let's get the piss out of here.'

Beko grinned. 'Spoken like a true Voyager.'

The Serians were already mounted up and stroking their horses' necks, whispering and whistling to them, and at a word from Beko they moved out.

Ramus had not ridden for some time. Ramin had been good to his word, securing Ramus's travelling gear to the horse's saddle, but still Ramus felt like an amateur. He mounted easily enough, but he dropped the reins several times and his foot missed the stirrup. Nomi and Beko left the yard ahead of him, and as he finally rode out, he looked up the slope after Pancet. The big man was standing by an open door, one hand raised to his mouth holding a new chunk of meat, the other slowly raising to bid them farewell.

Ramus did not return the wave.

To be continued at the next tour stop...
25th May on Graeme's Fantasy Book Review