

FALLEN

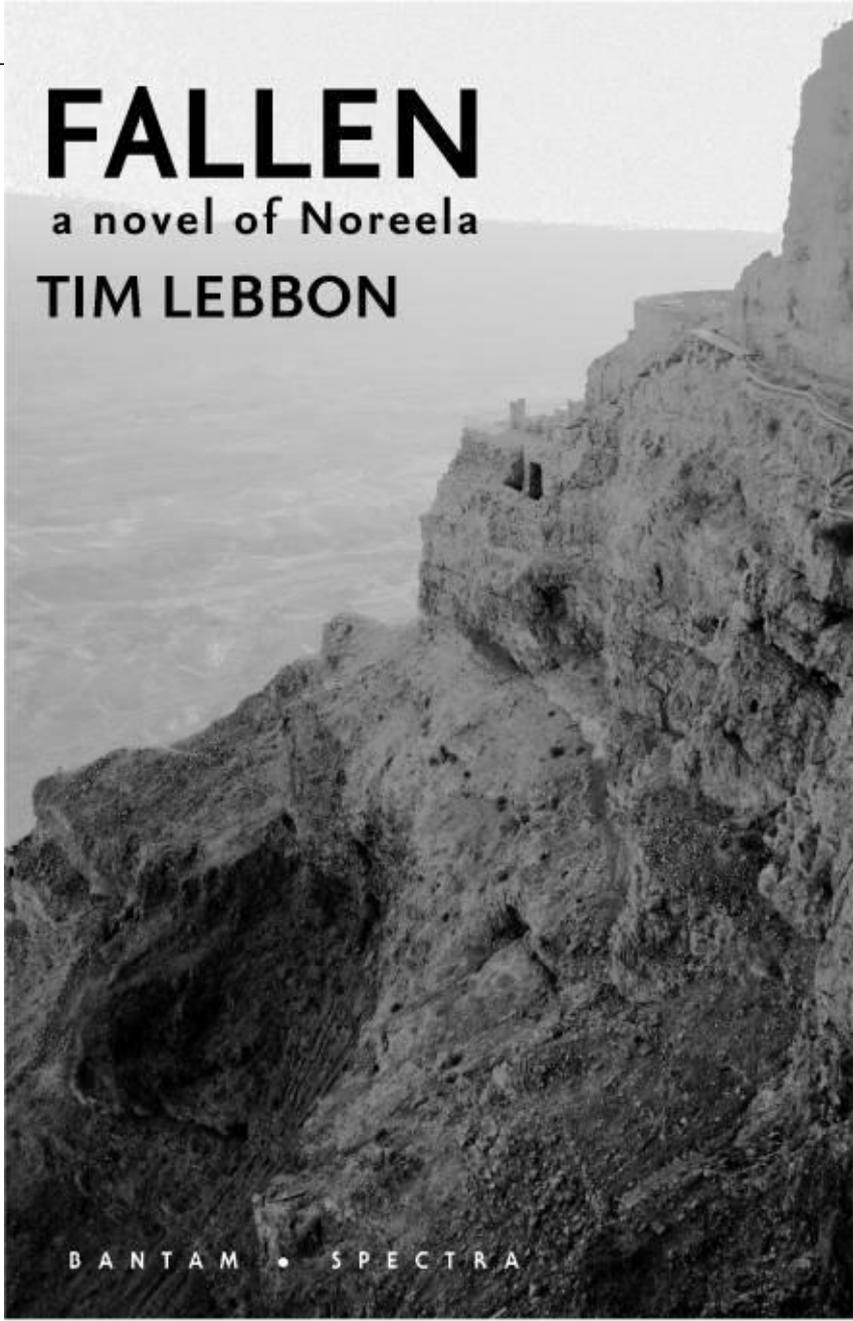
Tim Lebbon

FALLEN

a novel of Noreela

TIM LEBBON

BANTAM • SPECTRA



FALLEN

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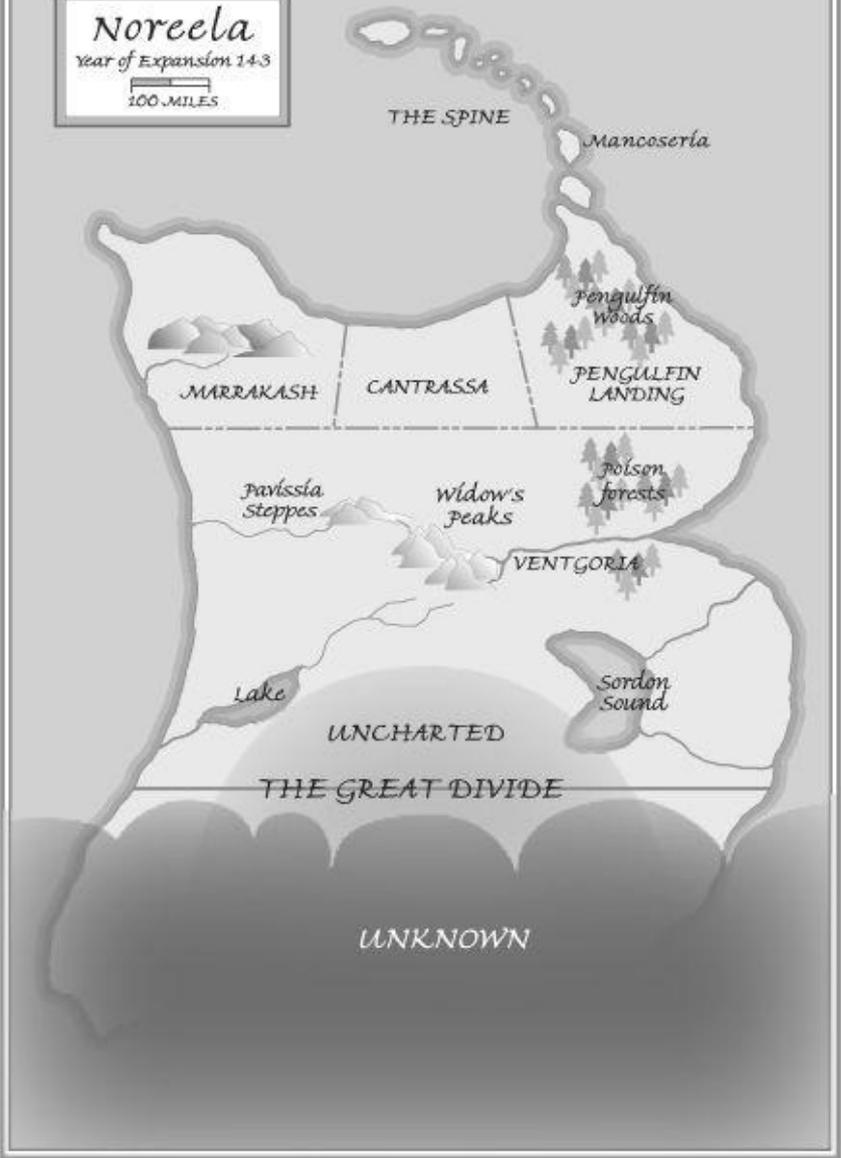
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This one's for my good friend Steve Volk

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Noreela
Year of Expansion 14-3
100 MILES



PART ONE
The final
Voyage

Ten—Into the Wild—Betrayals

“Humans crave knowledge, and when that craving ends, we are no longer human.”

Sordon Perlenni, the First Voyage

Chapter 1

RAMUS RHEEL HATED the moment between sleeping and waking. It was a strange place, haunted by recent dreams and the ghosts of those long since passed, and he loathed it even more when one of the fading dreams was a good one. This latest had been about a voyage, though one he had not yet made. Dreams about voyages he *had* made were more usually night-mares.

He sat up and held his head as the dizziness filtered away and real life forced itself in. He was forty-four years old. He could recall a dream he'd had when he was six—sailing west from the shores of Noreela and finding the edge of the world—but he had already forgotten the one he'd just had. He wondered whether this was peculiar to him.

Yet what had woken him? It was not yet dawn, and the streets were quiet. A dog whimpered somewhere and surreptitious footsteps echoed, but Long Marrakash was still largely asleep. And so should he be, if he knew what was best for him.

Something banged in the room next door. It was the main room in his home and contained the only door onto the street.

He froze, listening hard. Another knock, wood against wood. *That was my chair being nudged in the table*, Ramus thought. He stood quickly, wincing as his knees popped, and reached back across his bed. He kept his leather weapon roll on a shelf above where he slept, but it had not been used for some while. He grabbed one trailing strap, pulled, and the roll unraveled onto the bed.

Something scraped across the floor, and he heard a muttered curse.

Ramus's heart was thumping. He'd had occasion to fight several times on his voyages, but he had never thought himself a fighting man. He had no grace of movement and his reaction speed was slow and he had scars that bore testament to that.

He drew a short knife from the roll and knelt beside the bed, losing himself in deeper shadows.

“Ramus?” The voice was low and uncertain.

Ramus half stood, then thought better of it. *Just because they know my name doesn't mean they're here for anything good.*

“Ramus, are you—?” Whoever had broken into his home tripped as they reached for his sleeproom door. They grunted, fell into the door and knocked it open.

Ramus pressed his knife to the invader's throat.

“Ramus, by all the gods, it's me!”

“Nomi?” Ramus fell back and dropped his knife, appalled. *Was I really going to slice her throat?* Maybe, maybe not. Like his dreams, his true intentions already seemed to be fading away, and for that he was glad.

“I think I've broken my wrist.”

“You scared the shit out of me, Nomi!”

“Can we have some light in here? I need to see if the bone's sticking out.”

“If the bone were sticking out you'd be doing more than whimpering about it.” Ramus stood and went to the window. He drew the curtain aside to let in death-moonlight, its pale yellow glow revealing more of the room's shape and depth.

Nomi was still sitting on the floor by the open door, nursing her left arm. “Don't you have a lamp?”

“Running low on oil.”

“I'll give you some money for oil, Ramus.”

Ramus sparked his lamp and turned it up. He sheathed the knife and retied the weapon roll. Nomi mumbled something and Ramus looked at the back of her head. She seemed bedraggled and flustered, which was rare for her. Not good for her image.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Came to see you.” Nomi held her hand up, flexed her fingers and sighed, seemingly happy that her wrist was not shattered.

“I doubt it'll even bruise,” Ramus said. “Nomi, it's obvious that you've come to see me. But why break in? And why sneak around in my rooms like a thief?”

She stood and brushed herself down, smiling contritely. “I suppose I look like a fool. But I came to tell you something. *Ask you something.*” She sighed, sitting on the bed and brushing loose hair back from her face.

“Spit it out,” Ramus said. Nomi had been to his home a hundred times before, but this was the first time she had been in his sleep-room. It made him uncomfortable.

“I'm not thinking straight,” she said. “Give me a beat. Something like this doesn't happen every night.”

“You got humped!” Ramus said, mock-elated. He threw his hands in the air and reached for a bottle of wine on a shelf.

“Ramus, this is *important!*”

He popped the cork with his teeth and sat on a chair. “Fine,” he said, taking a swig of wine. It was good—a gift from Nomi following her latest importation of Ventgorian grapes—but the first taste always made him cringe. He offered her the bottle and she accepted, taking a long draught herself. “Spit it out, tell me.”

“I met someone,” she said. “Last night, just before midnight in the First Heart Wine Rooms. He looked exhausted, like he'd been walking forever. I knew he was a wanderer—there was a distance in his eyes, as though he'd seen things no one else could imagine. He looked around, then approached the bar and asked if they had root wine.”

“So, a wanderer ordered a drink. Are you going to get to the point?”

“Ramus, you have to meet him!” She stood and paced the small room, nervous and excited. “I've arranged to meet for breakfast, down by the river. He has something he wants to sell, and I think we need to buy.”

“‘We’? You know I don't have two pieces to rub together.”

Nomi waved at the air and shook her head, as though impatient. “No, no, I'll pay. But you and I need to enter into this together.”

“Enter into what?”

“An agreement.” She sat again, never taking her eyes from Ramus. *I could get lost in that gaze,* he thought. He shoved the notion aside. He and Nomi had met ten years ago, and they were the most friendly enemies he had ever known. Competitors, jealous Voyagers, and so dissimilar that he sometimes wondered how they even spoke the same language. Yet he harbored emotions for her, keeping them so deep that even he was not certain of them, and sometimes he saw confused thoughts in *her* eyes. But he feared that they were merely reflections of his own.

“You're a mess,” he said. “Look at you. Your trousers don't even match your jacket.”

“I got dressed quickly. Went home, couldn't sleep, then knew I had to come to see you.”

“Why? What has this wanderer got?”

Nomi's eyes burned, her cheeks flushed and her lips pursed. A smile spread across her face. “I won't tell you,” she said at last, the words bursting from her. “But we need to agree—”

“Nothing, until I know what this is all about. How much money is involved?”

She shook her head and swigged from the wine bottle again. “That's not important.”

Ramus pretended to collapse against the wall. “Now you *truly* have me worried!”

“You’ll see.” She stood and clunked the bottle back onto its shelf. “You’ll see, Ramus. Meet me at

Naru May’s for breakfast. You must hear what this wanderer has to say, and see what he has to show.

“I do?”

“If you want to change your life, yes.” She glanced around the room, and for a second Ramus hated her; the look of disgust was bad enough, but the vague contempt in her voice was cutting.

Nomi left without another word, and Ramus was glad to see her go.

RAMUS HAD NEVER thought of Nomi Hyden as a real Voyager. To him voyaging was a way of life, not a means to an end, and the wealth Nomi had gathered during and after her two voyages to Ventgoria had bought off whatever spirit she’d had to begin with. She was rich in coin but poor in heart, and that had always been a barrier between them. Ramus had little but knew much, and he strove to know more.

It had been over a year since he returned from his last voyage, bringing back maps, charts, plant samples, three books and a collection of myths from the Widow in the mountains. The mountains had no name, and neither did the woman, but she claimed to be adept at magichala—rich in the knowledge of the plants, animals and seasons of her land—and he was beginning to believe her claim. He had made three voyages into her mountains, and each time she showed him more.

He craved to go farther. He had voyaged across the north of Noreela: the Cantrassan coast, the Pengulfin Woods, two sea journeys out to some of the unnamed islands of The Spine. And though his *real* vision took him elsewhere—past the mountains, past the Pavissia Steppes and into the uncharted areas to the south—he had no money to hire Serians to guard his way, and the Guild of Voyagers would not aid him. Most of them thought he was a minor Voyager given to mad dreams.

But he wanted to be the best.

And because he was filled with thwarted desires, Nomi angered him. Her money could take her anywhere, yet she had only ever been to Ventgoria: the first time, he still believed, with a true sense of discovery; the second, simply to establish a continuing exportation of finest Ventgorian fruits, which now flavored the wine that had made her name. She lived well on the proceeds.

Yet now, this. He was intrigued. He would not be able to sleep again that night, so he made himself some red root tea, took out some books—his own treasures—and began to read.

IT WAS A mile down to the river. Ramus gave himself plenty of time.

He always enjoyed watching the city come awake. As the sun peered around the shoulders of the mountains to the east it seemed to cast life upon Long Marrakash, sending away the night things—and there were some, though most people did their best to ignore them—and giving the city back to the day. There was always a sense of enthusiasm about daybreak. Most people attributed this to the potential in the time to come, though some claimed it was thanks for the days gone by. A few, questioned in one of the Wine Rooms after a few cups of root wine, would claim that it was gratitude for surviving the night.

She came to me in the night, he thought. That troubled him. *Whatever it is that’s excited her, she came through the dangerous dark to invite me down here.* There were night blights that lived in shadows, and grew and shrank with them. There were the Stalkers, who slept by the day and made the darkness *their* time; normal people with abnormal desires, though many sought to make monsters of them. And there were other things: the wraiths of those long gone, and truer shadows that had the semblance of life. Long Marrakash was the heart of Marrakash, and Marrakash was the heart of Noreela, yet even here people vanished into the darkness and were never seen again.

But day was good, and dawn was the hour of worship, especially for those who worshipped commerce: traders and dealers rushing this way and that to reach their shops; Cantrassan streets

vendors shouting at their slaves as they pushed loaded wagons to market; egg sellers shrilling at the flocks as they wheeled extravagant perches through the crowds; wholesalers flitting from one shop to another as they muttered orders under their breath; and people sitting along the streets taking breakfast before a full day of buying and selling, trading and dealing, loaning and hiring.

There were also those who chose to give dawn's hour to their own particular gods. Ramus passed by several groups chanting and running their fingers over runes carved into the foundations of ancient buildings. Some claimed to understand what the runes meant, but Ramus knew that they were all but unreadable, the forgotten language of a vanished civilization. Perhaps if the giant stones had been brought here in order and assembled in the correct sequence, they may have retained their meaning. But all across Long Marrakash, similar blocks were incorporated into buildings upside down and back to front. Most were badly weathered, and Ramus could not help looking down on those who worshipped them. The runes were the history of a long-dead people, their story spread across the city like crumbs from broken bread. Paying homage to such a tale was like worshipping dust.

Others crowded into temples built to the moon gods, or gathered around shamans in the streets. Some of these shamans could read, and they held books as examples of their power. A few used such knowledge to twist the histories they read, telling stories to give themselves honored backgrounds and imaginary ancestors, and Ramus despised such perversions of knowledge. But he reserved great hatred for those taken in by it.

Halfway to the river he passed a relatively new building—perhaps only five generations old—that housed a shrine to the Sleeping Gods. It was a simple stone structure without windows, a variety of symbols carved on the outside, a glow emanating through the door from the hundreds of candles burning inside, and once again Ramus felt its draw. *I have my own beliefs*, he would tell himself and anyone interested enough to listen. *The god of knowledge and the power of the land. Nobody tells me what to think.*

Still, sometimes he considered going inside. The Sleeping Gods had long been a fascination for the Voyagers, ever since the first Voyager, Sordon Perlenni, had set out to discover their legend one hundred and forty-three years before. He had returned again and again, from different parts of Noreela, but all he had ever brought back were more scraps of campfire myth. Some said the benevolent gods were Noreela's first, its founders and shapers, and that they had gone down to sleep and left Noreela open and available—when the humans arrived.

Perlenni had vanished over a century before, and some believed he had found what he was seeking. Others suspected he had simply been swallowed into the distant parts of Noreela like so many Voyagers since.

A distant bell rang, and Ramus realized he would be late for his meeting with Nomi.

NARU MAY'S WAS an expensive eatery built on a heavy timber deck over the River Kash, and Ramus had only ever ate here with Nomi. He much preferred the food from street vendors back in The Heights—it was fresher, cooked better and a tenth of the price—but the valley was where the wealth congregated. He didn't mind venturing down here on occasion, so long as Nomi paid.

He paused a hundred steps from the wooden bridge leading out to the deck, taking in the scenery.

The riverside was bustling. Fishing sloops bobbed on the waves, nets cast, and a few had already off-loaded their morning's catch. The scent of fresh fish filled the air, and impromptu auctions had started.

Along the riverfront, traders had set up stalls, and the largest was run by a dozen heavily tattooed Cantrass Angels selling fine woven cloth: silk so sheer it was almost weightless, rugs and decorative hangings. Some of the women were naked—clothed only in the complex and mystical tattoos—and their stall was busy. Ramus had never trusted their kind. There was far more going on with them than

anyone ever saw, and he believed that one day they would be revealed as something more than simple weavers and traders. And indeed, buying and selling was not the only exchange occurring at their stall. While ten women displayed, two stood back in the shadows, examining the crowd with dark eyes and making cryptic marks on their bodies. Black ink, traced there using the claws of mountain wolves.

Ramus was certain their tattoos changed day by day.

Farther along the riverside a couple of transport boats nudged against the stone quay, their decks piled with cages of differing types and sizes. Ramus could smell the animals from here, and not all the smells were familiar. Sheebok was the strongest—the rich, pungent stench of shit and fear from a species that seemed to know it was bred only for eating. But there were other, wilder scents, and he debated whether or not to investigate. The trade in exotic food was increasing as the Age of Expansion pushed the borders of civilization ever southward, and he had commented to Nomi that some people were too greedy to consider the dangers of what they were bringing back. She had laughed at him, of course. *A goat from here is the same as a goat from there*, she'd said. But he had reminded her of her own voyages to Ventgoria, and what she had seen there, and her expression had clouded for a few beats before she waved his concerns away.

He had heard of ravens, existing far to the south, that stole dreams. Pecked holes in skulls while their victims were asleep. Bring a few mating pairs of those things to Long Marrakash and—

“Ramus!”

He blinked, looked at the wooden bridge and saw Nomi standing there. A tall, slender man stood behind her, head bowed. She beckoned Ramus over.

“Ramus, this is Ten.”

Ramus nodded at the tall man. “First name, last or one in between?”

“Only name,” Ten said.

Ramus held out his hands and, after a brief pause, the man grasped them in his own. “Good travels,” Ramus said.

Ten smiled, a hint of mockery behind the leathery mask of his face.

“Let's eat!” Nomi said. “I'm starving. I hear they caught a cloud of river plumes last night. Shall we?”

Nomi went first and, after an awkward moment, Ten followed. Ramus came last, using the time it took them to reach Naru May's to examine the man.

He really was a wanderer. Ramus had been doubtful last night, but the man's true nature was obvious. The mix of clothes, the skin leathered by the sun and elements, the neutral accent—although Ramus thought he'd detected a twang of the Pavissia Steppes somewhere in there. Ten also exuded the vague superiority projected by every wanderer when they visited a settlement, especially one as large as Long Marrakash. The feeling was often well earned; the average wanderer had seen more than most Noreelans.

It was also rare that they lived into old age. The dangers of Noreela would take them—the harsh elements; clashes with other wanderers, nomadic tribes or marauders or falling prey to some of Noreela's deadlier wildlife. This man looked ten years Ramus's senior, which Ramus could respect. He carried a longbow over his left shoulder, a quiver of arrows across his back and a short, wide sword in a scabbard strapped to his leg. Ramus could hear the clinks of other weapons secreted beneath his cloak.

They took a table close to the edge of the deck and a server hurried across, ignoring the outstretched hands of several other patrons.

“Savi,” Nomi said, “it's a good morning, and we have a guest. I want a bowl of sautéed river plumes, a selection of bread, a bottle of cydrax . . .” She looked at Ramus, eyebrows raised.

“Sheebok testicles?” Ramus asked. The girl nodded, then looked at Ten.

The tall man said nothing.

“And a bowl of plumes for my guest,” Nomi said. “And Savi? The good plumes. Make sure they haven't dried out.”

“Of course, Mam Hyden.” The girl hurried away to the covered kitchen at the corner of the deck.

“You might as well own this place,” Ramus said.

Nomi shrugged. “Ten, this is the man I was telling you about.”

“The Voyager?” Ten looked at Ramus, appraising him for the first time. “Where have you been?”

For a heartbeat Ramus was ready to curse him. But he sensed Nomi's tension, her simmering excitement, and he was intrigued. Piss, he was more than intrigued, he was *interested*.

“My main interest is the unnamed mountains, bordering Ventgoria and—”

“I know where they are,” Ten said. “Where else?”

“Penguin Woods,” Ramus said. “The Cantrassan coast. Some of the islands of The Spine.”

Ten nodded thoughtfully. “I've been to the Divide.”

The table fell silent. Ramus held his breath, waiting for Ten's expression to break into a mocking smile, but it did not. His eyes were cool, his mouth downturned.

Nomi's eyes glittered.

“No one has been there and returned,” Ramus said.

Ten snorted and rolled his eyes. “You believe that?”

“Of course. I know that. I'm a Voyager, of the Guild of Voyagers. I know three Voyagers who went south for the Great Divide over the space of ten years. No one has seen them again.”

“Haven't they?”

“Stop answering me with pissing questions!”

“Why?” Ten smiled, and Ramus realized he was playing the wanderer's game.

“What's it like there?” Nomi asked.

The wanderer looked past Ramus at the kitchen, lifting his head and sniffing the scent of food in the air. “That's part of my story,” he said.

“Is that where you found what you showed me last night?” Nomi asked.

“What *did* he show you?” Ramus was becoming frustrated that the stranger seemed to have taken control of the conversation. He likely spent nine-tenths of his life on his own, yet in company he had quickly and easily gained the advantage.

Nomi looked across the table at Ramus, jaw clenching as if ready to speak. But then she shook her head. “It's for him to show and tell,” she said. “But Ramus, you know I wouldn't have come to you with something trivial.”

“Not friends?” Ten asked, glancing from one to the other.

“We're Voyagers,” Ramus said.

“Ah. And voyaging doesn't allow friendships.” Ten took a spiced nut from the bowl on the table and chewed slowly.

That's right, Ramus thought. *He knows us well*. He glanced at Nomi and she looked quickly away.

Savi came with a bottle of cydrax and three mugs, and three plates balanced on her right hand and arm. She placed them on the table with a flourish. “Anything else, Mam Nomi?”

Nomi indicated the two empty tables next to them. “Some privacy would be good. Keep those tables free, if you will.”

Savi nodded, glanced at Ten and walked away quickly.

“Sweet,” Ten said.

“She's thirteen.”

The tall man shrugged.

“Why are you called Ten?” Ramus asked.

"I was my mother's tenth child."

Ramus nodded thoughtfully and pushed the roasted testicles around his plate. The sauce looked perfect, the meat tender and delicious. "It's an unlucky number for some."

"It was for my mother. She died having me."

"I'm sorry."

Ten chewed a huge spoonful of river plumes and sighed with delight. "I never knew her," he said through a full mouth. "But she had a good life for a wanderer, and long, and I'm told she loved her children well."

Ramus looked across at Nomi. She was spooning her food around the plate, frowning, tense and expectant. He could see the excitement there that had been so apparent last night, but this morning was tempered by something else. Caution, perhaps? Or concern that this wanderer could take them for fools?

"Many people have seen the Great Divide," Ten continued, his voice dropping slightly. He finished his mouthful and put his spoon down. "Truly, I have seen it. But few who see it choose to talk about it. It's . . . frightful."

"Huge?"

"Massive. Immense. But not only that. It bears its own awful gravity, which tears the wonder from you and replaces it with fear. It's the end of the world. At least, that's what legend says. But . . . there's more. Truly." Ten frowned and shook his head, as if to loosen a memory. He poured a generous measure of cydrax, hesitated, then poured for Nomi and Ramus as well.

"Surely some who have seen it could talk about it? You are."

"I have better reason than most."

"And that is . . . ?"

"The parchments," Nomi said. "You found them there."

Ten nodded and took a deep swig of cydrax. He belched lightly and drank some more.

"Parchments?" Ramus asked. He hated being led along, but there was something behind this story and Ten's telling of it that rang true. Maybe it was Nomi's fascination and excitement. Or more likely it was Ten's obvious discomfort.

"You read?" the wanderer asked.

"Of course. I'm a Voyager, and the mind is the greatest place to explore. The minds of others too when they choose to record what they think and know."

Ten looked across at Nomi. She nodded. "That's why I told him. Perhaps he can read the parchments."

"Then they're worth something?" the wanderer asked.

And it all comes down to this, Ramus thought. Money. Well, I'm glad Nomi is here.

"Let me see them," Ramus said, "and—"

"You'll hear my tale first," Ten said.

Ramus finished his food and leaned back in his chair. The world went on around them. People ate and chatted, boats and sloops drifted along and across the river, traders traded and fishermen fished. But he suddenly felt more removed than usual.

He always felt like a visitor to Long Marrakash. He was driven to travel and explore—scratchy feeling his mother had called it—and whenever he lived in the city, even for two or three years at a time, he always felt temporary. Just somewhere to rest and plan his next voyage.

Nomi waved Savi over and ordered two more bottles of cydrax, and the three of them fell silent. Then Ten started talking, and Ramus experienced an instant of intense emotion: excitement, exhilaration and the taste of a fresh voyage ahead.

"I'VE SPENT A long time walking back and forth before the Divide," Ten began. "It draws you. I know said earlier that it's . . . terrifying, but there's an attraction as well. It pulls you in and holds you close and sometimes it just won't let go."

"The first time I saw it, I was about twenty. I had a run-in with a band of marauders on the Paviss Steppes, and I went south to get away from them. I knew what was supposed to be there, but I was young and feisty, and I'd just killed my first man."

He trailed off, pouring more cydrax and looking at Nomi and Ramus. *Trying to see if we're shocked* Ramus thought. *Nomi is, I can see that. But I hope she won't give him the satisfaction.*

"Anyway," Ten said, and drank some more. "The feistiness didn't last. I got away from the marauders and kept going south. After a long time I found the Divide . . . or maybe it found me. It's a cliff that reaches into the sky." He looked up into the clear blue above them, shaking his head. "Heaven the sky has no scale. It's blue and beautiful, but there's no real sense of it. There, the Divide touches the sky and seems to devour it. The cliff rises higher than the clouds, which seem to shroud its top permanently—if it even has one. It goes east and west as far as you can see, and disappears around the belly of the land. First time I saw it, I spent a whole moon camped a few miles from its base, thinking I would never get away. There was plenty of food; berry bushes, root crops, wild sheebok grazing along the foothills. I ate well. There were flying things that buzzed me, but they never came close again after I shot one down with my crossbow. In the evenings, I'd sit and listen to the tumblers rolling across the plains." He took another drink.

Tumblers! Ramus thought. *I always thought they were legend!* But still he reserved judgment. Ten was a good storyteller, yet perhaps that was *all* he was. Time, as Ramus's mother had said, would tell.

"That was when I first started thinking for myself. Until then, I'd never truly been a wanderer. I walked, yes. I traveled from here to there, but I spent most of my time simply surviving. There in the shadow of the Divide, I came alive. I spent the nights sitting by my fire and thinking on what the Divide could mean. What was at its top, if it had one? What was behind it?"

"There's nothing behind it," Nomi scoffed.

"Then why is it called the Divide?" Ramus asked.

Ten smiled. "So I sat there night after night, a good meal in my belly and the cool night air alive in my senses. I'd been drinking only water for a couple of moons, and I felt so much closer to the land. Almost as if I could plunge my hand into its loam and touch its magic."

"Pah!" Nomi snorted. "You're no magichalan." She regarded such people with derision, Ramus knew, though he could never understand why. She was a Voyager and had seen many strange things in the marshes of Ventgoria. Why not believe in magic?

"No, I'm not. But the Divide makes you appreciate the potential in things. And this whole world is thrumming with potential."

Nomi chuckled and took a sip of her cydrax.

"How long did you stay there?" Ramus asked.

"Three moons, camped in its shadow. At dawn I'd see a moment of sun, and then only dusk. After a while, I started thinking about finding where it ended."

"I've always heard that there is no end," Ramus said. "That it goes on, out beyond Norela's shores."

"Maybe," Ten said. "But the closer I came to the eastern shore, the more treacherous the landscape became. Plain turned to marsh, and then bog. The bogs were venting poisonous gases, and there were creatures in there . . . huge. I never saw them, but I heard them, and I felt the ground shiver as they rose and rolled. So I worked northward, leaving the Divide's shadow at last. And by the time I reached the shore, I could no longer see the Divide. The bogs steamed, the clouds closed in and wherever the cliff struck the coast was out of view."

"I would have stayed there, but the bog gas would have killed me eventually. And if not the gas"

those things that lived there.” He opened the third bottle of cydrax. The alcohol seemed to be having little effect. “I could hear them rising from the bog and dragging themselves toward me. Perhaps they were close. Or perhaps they were a long way off, and larger than I imagined. I didn't stay to find out.”

“Voyagers have tried sailing past the Divide,” Nomi said.

“Piss,” Ramus said. “They've set out with that intention, but no one knows if they succeeded because they've not been seen again.”

Ten nodded, a satisfied smile on his face.

“Maybe they're still sailing,” Ramus speculated.

“Or maybe,” the wanderer said, “they're in the stomachs of the bog beasts, or at the bottom of the sea, or washed up rotting against the shore. Noreela is a hungry land.”

“You have a way of making it such an attractive place,” Ramus said, but his interest was piqued. “Go on. What happened next?”

“I went west,” Ten said. “I traveled again in the shadow of the Divide, heading for the Western Shores. I hoped that there I would find what the east had hidden, but I was wrong.”

“What was there?” Nomi asked.

“A jungle. I started in, but the trees soon grew so close together that I could barely pass by. And there were creatures there too. Spiders as big as my hand; snakes as thick as my thigh; ants; worms with teeth; flies that sucked my blood and left poison in its place. And other things, not animals. Not human. A *bad* place. I only touched its outer extremes, but I knew it went on for days.”

“So you went north?” Ramus asked. “Tried to skirt the forest but keep the Divide in view? Only the forest grew north as well, and by the time you reached the Western Shores, the Divide was too far away to see?”

Ten stared at him for some time, so long that Ramus looked away, unnerved.

“You don't believe me,” Ten said.

“I've met a lot of wanderers in my time, and they're known to . . . elaborate.”

“Ramus,” Nomi said, her voice bearing a warning.

“I'm telling the truth,” Ten said. “If any Voyager had made it back from that place, they'd tell you the same.”

“But you have more to tell,” Ramus said.

Ten glanced at Nomi, reached into his cloak and then decided against it. “I'll tell you first,” he said. “Then I'll show you.”

Ramus sat back and crossed his hands on his stomach.

“I walked back along the Divide. Camped here and there, ate well, listened to the tumblers in the north. It took me two moons to gather the courage to do what I knew I must.”

“You climbed,” Nomi said.

Ten nodded slowly. “Up into the foothills first. And then, where the hills ended and the cliffs began, I started up.” He leaned forward, elbows resting on the table, long hair hanging down on either side of his face. “I never got very high, but I found signs that others had climbed before me.”

“What signs?” Ramus asked, but he could already guess.

“Bodies. Or what was left of them. Skeletons mostly, but some were . . . fresher. Looked as if they'd been chewed. And all badly broken, as if they had climbed higher, then fallen.”

“Fallen,” Ramus whispered. “How many?”

Ten shrugged. “Six? Eight? I climbed eight times at various points along the Divide. I made it through a hundred steps high, maybe four hundred, and then . . .”

“No more routes,” Ramus said. “Like the cliffs were never meant to be climbed.”

Ten shook his head. “Not that, no. I could have gone farther on at least two occasions. But every time I found a body, I lost my nerve.”

“So you never got as high as the clouds?”

“Nowhere near.”

“And no one else did, either?”

“I can't know that. If they did, and did not fall, then . . .”

“Maybe they're still climbing?”

“Or maybe they reached the top.”

“It's believed there is no top,” Nomi said.

“Of course,” Ramus said. “If there *was* a top to the Great Divide, there would be something south of the cliff face. For most Noreelans, that's unthinkable. It's been a problem for thinkers for centuries. There are books full of it.”

“You've seen these books?” Ten asked.

“A couple. There's one in the Marrakash Library, not a mile from here. And I know people who keep books to themselves.”

“I could write one,” Ten said. “And I could give it an ending.”

Ramus laughed again. “You tell a good story, wanderer, but you need more than words and hearsay to—”

Ten reached into his cloak again, and this time his eyes were full of purpose. Nomi sat up straighter. She looked at Ramus, her eyes sparkling with something he had only ever rarely seen on her face: the thrill of discovery.

Ten brought out a rolled parchment, tied with a knot of leather.

“What's this?” Ramus asked.

The knot whispered as it came apart. “I found these close to one of the bodies.”

“What are they?”

The wanderer flattened the parchment pages—three of them—across the table, his hands still obscuring the uppermost page. “The body was broken,” he said. “Every bone shattered, as though he or she had fallen from a great height.” He glanced around, sat back and revealed the pages. “Perhaps a way from the top.”

Ramus leaned forward and turned his head, and for a heartbeat the images did not register.

And then he saw.

“Well?” Nomi whispered.

Ramus touched the top page and traced the first of the images. “By every fucking god that ever touched Noreela!” he said.

“Not *every* god,” Ten said. “Just this one.”

RAMUS SENT TEN away. Nomi objected, but Ramus gave her one of his harsh stares.

“Don't go elsewhere,” Nomi said. “We're the Voyagers you need to deal with on this. I have the ear of Marquella, and he has the support of the Guild. If we feel that this is worth pursuing, I can ensure that you're paid everything you're due.”

Standing beside the table, the wanderer seemed taller than ever. The sun cast his shadow across Nomi's face, and she wondered what it would be like to live in shadow forever. “I'll be back at noon,” he said. But he seemed to find it difficult to leave the pages behind.

“You can trust us,” Ramus said.

“It's not about trust,” Ten said. “I've had those with me for a long time.”

“We'll look after them,” Nomi said. She smiled her most charming smile, and the wanderer was looking at her as he walked away, not at what he had left behind.

Savi came to their table when he had left, and Nomi asked for some water and a bowl of river cherries. She felt like a treat.

“So what do you think?” she asked at last.

Ramus sat back in his chair, hands clasped in front of his face, eyes never moving from the parchment. His stubble was three days old, and Nomi could see the dirt beneath his fingernails. She knew the signs. He needed to go out again.

“How can we ignore this, Ramus?” she said passionately.

“It could be a hoax.” And there it was, his pissing cynicism, coming to the fore. He once told her something his mother had told him: *Everything is a lie until proven*. She hated that attitude, yet it gave him the endlessly inquisitive, questing mind that she so lacked.

“It's no hoax, Ramus. Look closer. You're a Voyager, and so am I. We have our differences, I know. But can't you see what this could be? The biggest find since Sordon Perlenni first went out! This could mean . . .” She swept her hand across the surface of the top parchment, wondering whose hand had hovered there to draw those images and symbols, and what it had looked like. “This could mean a whole new race of Noreelans.”

“On top of the Divide?”

“Yes. And more, Ramus.” She pointed at the bottom corner of the second parchment, and at the curled thing, sleeping like an infant in its mother's womb. She'd already seen him eyeing the image and looking away again, terrified and excited. Her voice was a whisper. “You know what that is.”

He looked at her, then back to the parchments. He stood quickly, his chair squealing back across the deck as he snatched them up. “I have to examine these.”

“Ramus—”

“Why did you come to me?” he said, glaring at her.

Nomi could only be honest. “You're the most brilliant person I know.”

Ramus dipped his head, acknowledging the fact rather than accepting the praise. “Then let me take these to the library. I'll meet you back here a half before noon.”

Nomi watched him leave, the parchment rolled and hidden beneath his jacket. For a moment she wanted to call him back, offer to go with him. But books were Ramus's domain.

NOMI HYDEN WALKED through the waterside market, trying to curb her excitement and think about all the arrangements she must make.

While Ramus examined the pages, she needed to put a voyage together.

Walking toward her home, unconsciously taking the quieter route so that she could think, the plan formed itself in her mind like a map. Naru May's was at the beginning, and at the end—two miles uphill to the south—was her home. Between those two points, other vital destinations began to take shape.

Nomi always thought this way—images, pictures, visions of what was to come. It came of being a dreamer, she supposed, but it was also a product of her mapmaking mind. A good map could light the way for even the most troubled soul. And a great map could change the lie of the land. Miss troublesome street here, a run-down hovel there, and you altered the nature of the place you were mapping. Districts can be moved by a mapmaker; not physically, but in the minds of all those who read their work. She could toy with people's perception of places, names and geographies, or she could make them see straight. Mostly she had no need for obfuscation, but sometimes having the tale could help.

She guessed she had gained this furtive approach to map-drawing on her first voyage to Ventgoria. There, nothing stayed the same. A path leading to this place one year would lead somewhere else the following year. A hill would become a marshy plain in the space of a long wet winter, and ponds and pools drained and refilled with the frequency of leaves falling and fresh buds forming. It was a land that defied mapping, and those locals who would deign to talk to her blamed the steam dragons. The

said the dragons came when the steam vents opened, snaked their way through the land just below the surface, straightening serpentine rivers and forcing hills of mud and stone from the sodden ground. And then they vented their steam and molded the land into its new shape.

Nomi had smiled at the stories, but she spent most of her first voyage there losing herself in the Ventgorian wilds. Even when she found a settlement, it might not be there the next day. The only things that seemed defined and fixed were the vast aerial grape plants, mile upon mile of vines networked between the bole trees. The sun was hot and constant, the moisture from below billowing occasional steam clouds, and she had found the best crop for the perfect wine.

The dependable plants had pinned her to the land, and their produce provided the wealth she now enjoyed.

If she walked fast and made her deals quickly, she would be back at Naru May's by noon, bathed, changed and ready to plan the voyage of her life.

With Ramus. That was exciting, but it troubled her as well. They had a complex history. So much time together, so many secrets. If she'd ever had siblings to compare him to, she might have thought of him as a brother.

Yet this was bigger than them. What Ten had brought would provide riches, glory, knowledge and danger enough for them both. And for the first time, the thought of what they were facing frightened rather than thrilled her.

BEKO HAVISON LIVED in the basement rooms beneath a tavern. He was a Serian—a soldier from Mancoseria, ready to sell his experience to the Guild of Voyagers—and he had accompanied Nomi on her second voyage to Ventgoria. It had been a relatively trouble-free journey, other than her sickness, but she had always seen the potential in him. They had talked a lot on that trip, and he had professed love of free poetry, but the raw strength that had seen him through five voyages was obvious. He could talk endlessly about moonlight touching the stark branches of a lightning tree, but he could never hide his scars.

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 talk 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. 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 flickering 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 wall, the smallest the length of Nomi's arm, the longest as tall as the room. A collection of intricately designed quivers lay on the 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 and 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 Beko had been on, he 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, organized 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 a hundred dead behind. How many of those were 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 him, 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 leaned 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 that 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 forever,” 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 imagine 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 Noreelan languages. He 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 leaned 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 up his mug 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 armory.

“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 to the street and went to find a runner.

Chapter 2

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 page 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 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, 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 smelled the unmistakable must of age. This library was his home away 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 recognized 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 and 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, freestanding 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 utilized some common Noreelan lettering, but each writer had adapted the language to their own aims, using symbolism, unique dialects, graphic representations, imagery known and unknown and preferences that often amounted to personal code.

Ramus walked toward the rear of the hall, passing the Burnt 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

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