

Prologue

He could hear dogs, far off — big dogs, hunting dogs — and he knew he had to run because the hunting dogs were hunting him.

There was a Sanctuary. He kept the knowledge a beacon in his mind. He knew the path, had trod it years before, but it was overgrown now, so overgrown, and he had no flame to light the way. The Keeper was gone, but the Presence would be there, locked among the thorns. The Presence was all powerful. She would embrace him, surround him, protect him. He still had the gladius, the jewelled and flashing blade. She would take it in payment. She could not refuse. She would protect him, disarm his enemies, turn them to stone, to pillars of fire, to hares to be hunted by their own dogs.

He faltered. His chest was aflame, his legs close to collapse. There should be a path, another path. The sword was brought up, its hilt glinting in the night's weak light, its blade a blur of shadow against the silhouetted trees as it swept through tangled briars. And he was running again, down an incline. The trees were thinning, the earth becoming softer underfoot, water and mud squelching as he ran, forcing between his toes, splashing up his legs, burning into his torn skin.

Ankle-deep now, he stood at the rim of the Pool, not a ripple stirring its surface. Trees crowded the edges as if they had backed away in deference, leaving a ring of sky so brightly starlit that he drew breath in wonder at the spectacle.

He spied a fallen tree, its roots lost in the darkness of the woodland, its leafless boughs reaching into the centre of the Pool. Splashing across, he heaved himself up. The trunk was covered with moss, and the water cascading from his legs turned the surface to slime, but his balance was good and he did not fall.

A single slapping of the water focused his attention and he brought up the sword two-handed against the leaping dog. Its dark shape grew to fill his vision, the starlight catching the bared fangs, coating the glistening tongue with frost. It did not yelp as the blade parted its ribcage. Blood spurted hot over his arms as he turned along the axis of the animal's leap to heave the body from the blade. It flew by his shoulder as if still under its own momentum, landing on the jutting branches to be impaled there, dripping gore into the dark liquid below.

The initial sacrifice.

He could hear his hunters crashing through the woodland, men as well as dogs, see yellow fire-torches flashing between the trees, but the Pool filled his senses: scents of rotting wood and peaty earth, of deer musk and boar dung. Most of all there was the Presence, waiting in her domain, waiting for him.

Anticipation made the hairs rise on his skin. It powered his blood and fired his sexual desire. He called with a voice deep and challenging. Again he called, and again, followed by an invocation fast and rhythmic. The gladius was taken in both hands, its blade pressed flat across his thigh. All his strength was applied, but it did not even bend. The dogs were close; he could hear them splashing at the edge of the Pool.

Lifting the weapon to shoulder height he sang out a second invocation, a third invocation — three by three by three — and the sword was tossed skywards to meet the twinkling stars. It turned as it rose, twisting along its length, the jewels set into its pommel blinking and winking against the darkness of the woods. Its thrust exhausted, it began to descend, out of the sky and the stars, down through the column of silhouetted trees, and into the yielding water with less sound than a pebble's drop.

On tip-toe he stood on the narrow trunk, head back, arms outstretched, every muscle tensed for the moment, for the coming of the Presence.

There was splashing, much splashing. A spear flew by his arm. He gave a great whoop of indrawn breath, a gasp, his eyes widening to the brightness of the stars, to the silence of the Pool below his feet. He called afresh, a great shout filled with horror. The name again, fear gripping the tone. He howled the name, bellowed it, fists clenched in anger. He railed at the Presence, jabbing at the air in front of him as if it were a person, seething abuse at an unseen form which gave no answer.

He did not see the dog. He felt its weight, its claws at his back. When the great fangs burst through his shoulder the night turned red to his eyes and he screamed until his lungs had no more air to make the noise. He was falling, the weight of the dog bearing him down, twisting in the air as the sword had twisted, man and dog together. The cold waters of the Pool enveloped him, breathing fire into the wounds on his back. And still he railed at the Presence, cursing and swearing vengeance until the bubbles frothing from his lips sparkled no more in the starlight, and the chilling liquid poured into his lungs, water hissing over red hot stone.

There were no trees.

The sky was a clear tempering blue. Burnished by the noon sunlight, it was the exact shade of the enamelled decoration borne by the gladius. A glorious colour, it seemed suspended so close that he might have raked its surface with his fingers and watched it ripple like an Otherworld pool.

But there were no trees.

Without trees there were no birds, and no bird's song to break the desperate keening of the wind across a land shaded from his sight. A desolate land, he reasoned, devoid of all living things except the sky above him and the water that bore him and refused his release.

He set aside anxiety. Had there ever been a time when none had sought to conspire against him: Senecio, his sword brother; Yslan, the Shrine Keeper; the Presence herself?

He spat his contempt in a string of phlegm. The Presence did not speak against him now, had never spoken but in the mind of the Keeper and through her twisted tongue. All those years wasted in trepidation of that which did not exist. The songs, the rituals, the very memory of her false existence—

How he *hated* her.

A sound caught him unawares, a cry as mournful as the wind. Focusing, he strained to hear it afresh, quartered the sky with his sight to catch a glimpse of beak or feather. A curlew! Its dagger-sharp wings set rigid against the air currents, it skimmed at the speed of an arrow to bank and return across his vision.

Oh, for such movement, such freedom...

It *would* be his. The summer was dying. The chill winds hugged the dusk and the dawn, dragging the mantle of winter behind them. There would be no mistake this time. The rite of passage would be fulfilled.

Drawing together an image of his sword-arm, he reached out to grasp the weapon's jewelled hilt with its enamelled decoration of sky-riven blue. The lure never failed to draw them. Let the warmth of the sun kiss his form spread among the water droplets. Let it lift him to the bosom of the darkest cloud. Let the wind carry him to the chosen. This time nothing would conspire against him. He, Ognirius Licinius Vranaun, he would pass through.

Chapter 1

His lungs were on fire and his legs felt like lead. If he had not been able to see the wall looming towards him, Nick would have thrown in the towel and collapsed on the grass. But Murray was behind him, stomping on his heels with the power of a raging bull elephant, the same height as himself but twenty kilos heavier, and Nick knew that he should have burned him off the park, should have been standing at the finish with his usual quip about the beer being warm. But he wasn't. Was nowhere near it. Murray was gaining on him. Was going to catch him and pass him. And there wasn't a thing he could do about it.

Summoning his last reserves, Nick willed himself another half metre. Too late he realised he had misjudged the distance to the wall. It had jumped forward to meet him, its stark geometric pattern filling his vision, offering no route of escape. He tried to lift his arms, to turn aside his head, but he had not left himself enough time. His shoulder connected with the rough red brick with such force that his feet left the ground and he was propelled through the air to land in a heap on the grass. Murray's booming voice filtered through his daze.

'Fuck me, Blaketon! I nearly had you!'

Nick tried to drag his sprawling limbs into some semblance of order, but the initial numbness was fast transforming into throbbing pain. At the very least he had dislocated his shoulder and broken his collarbone; at the very worst he was not long for this world.

'Christ, look at you. This is what happens after a summer of licentious debauchery.' Murray breathed hard, catching his wind. 'I, on the other hand, am reaping the benefits of a temperate and soul-enriching sabbatical.'

'Wanker.'

The profanity was meant to convey all the emotions of a first fifteen battle song, but it left Nick's lips a damp gasp. Murray guffawed. Nick couldn't understand where his friend was drawing his energy from. He'd felt better after being dragged semi-conscious from beneath a collapsed rugby scrum.

Murray was on his feet again, pumping his arms and jogging on the spot. The ground beneath Nick reverberated with each footfall, sending an oddly undulating spasm down his spine and along his ribs. At first it

felt curiously soothing, how he imagined riding a water bed, and then came the realisation that the sloshing was inside him, and a prickle of perspiration erupted over his body. He rolled himself over to watch the remains of his breakfast spread across the grass beneath his nose.

Strong hands raised him to his knees.

‘Any more where that came from?’

Nick thought about it and shook his head. His senses swam. He hoped Murray wasn’t going to let go of him. Without support he would end nose first in the lumpy slime seeping into the earth.

‘I’m going to sit you back. Ready?’

An arm slid round his ribs, and Nick felt as though he were floating in some dreamscape where actions were un-coordinated and strangely out of time. Was he passing out?

‘You look like shit.’

‘Feel it.’

Murray’s fingers gripped the back of his neck. ‘Drop your head between your knees.’

‘No!’ He had not meant to sound so panicked, but at least it stilled the insistent pressure of Murray’s hand.

‘Is he okay?’

The voice was unrecognised. Nick saw a pair of neatly creased denims move into his line of vision. That was all he needed: a spectator.

‘Will be soon,’ Murray was saying. ‘Do me a favour: watch him, will you, two minutes, while I grab our gear from the changing room?’

Murray stood and Nick started after him, to be forced back on to his haunches by a hand on his shoulder.

‘Don’t move or I’ll bounce you.’ Murray left, trotting along the side of the Sports Centre to its entrance.

The spectator didn’t say anything. Nick didn’t look up at him. The seconds ticked by. Two minutes came and went. The spectator moved his weight from one foot to the other. Not a sportsman, Nick concluded. He wished he would just leave.

‘A bit hard on the ale last night, were you?’

The voice was full of forced camaraderie bordering, Nick felt, on scorn. He let his gaze rise up the ironed denims until it reached a clutch of volumes carried uncomfortably by a thin-fingered hand. Although it was partly obscured, the silver print of the facing title screamed its worth at him. The spectator was a Sciences student. Nick had fallen foul of those supercilious bastards the previous semester when they had played an inter-faculty friendly.

His vision cleared. The world was moving in real time again, but when Nick looked up he squinted at the face of the spectator as if he

were having trouble focusing.

‘Malaria,’ he said quietly. ‘Sometimes there just isn’t the warning.’ He watched the youth’s expression cloud. ‘Damned debilitating,’ he added.

‘Oh. Yes. Er, I can imagine.’

Nick dropped his head to chortle low in his throat, and chalked one up for the Arts.

The ensuing silence was broken by the return of Murray who threw down his sports bag and proceeded to wrap Nick’s tracksuit top round his shoulders. The spectator sidled away and Nick rose to his feet, waving aside Murray’s help.

‘Feeling better, are we?’

‘Much.’

‘Good. For one awful moment I thought I was going to have to resort to mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.’

‘Spare me.’

‘Just what I thought. That’s why I left you with him. If you were going to infect anybody it wasn’t going to be me.’

They grinned at each other, sharing the relief of the moment.

‘Feel strong enough to walk to the Med Centre?’

‘I’m not going to the Med Centre.’

Picking up his sports bag, Murray took a step towards him. He didn’t have the height to tower over most people, but his bulk could blot out the sun.

‘Read my lips, lover: you are going to the Med Centre.’

Nick shook his head and started walking towards the complex of buildings at the further side of the sports field. ‘Don’t do a number on me, Murray. I’ve had it all fucking summer.’

They fell into step.

‘I guessed things hadn’t run quite according to plan when I saw the suntan Louise is sporting. What did she tell you?’

The muscles in Nick’s neck began to tighten. ‘I haven’t seen her.’

He nipped across the access road in front of a group of cyclists. One swore at him, but he paid no attention. The paved walkway between Staff House and the Sciences block had seen none of the early October sun, and the breeze which had seemed almost summer-like on the playing field tunnelled between the buildings with an edge that spoke of frost. Murray was at his shoulder before he reached the square.

‘Well, you can certainly step it out now, but what about tonight? The posters are up, y’know. There’ll be a lot of young blood wanting to show off their talent. After last season Hodgson has a scent for glory, and he’ll want only the best. You put in a replay of that little stunt and

he won't just shunt you off to the Med Centre, he'll call an ambulance.'

'I feel fine now.'

'All I'm saying is it might be an idea to put a word in his ear. Y'know, immune system fighting a virus, not able to put in a peak performance, going to dose yourself up and get an early night, etc, etc. Then if you do shit out your place is covered. And if you end up with 'flu you can go sneeze all over him to prove it.'

'I told you, I'm fine.'

They made their way through the people funnelling beneath the arch of the main Science building. Most seemed to be coming in the opposite direction, and half of them were pushing bicycles. Murray exchanged greetings with students he knew, and back out in the sunshine he drew level with Nick.

'I would have thought you would have hoped to go down with something like 'flu, just to put your mind at rest that it's nothing more serious.'

'I really worried you, didn't I?'

'Let's just say that I had this thought of dropping Law and taking up Medicine.'

'I'm fine. Honest.'

'Yeah, sure. Do us both a favour, eh? Get a shower and climb into bed for the rest of the day.'

Nick shook his head. 'I've a seminar at 11.15.'

'Give it a miss.'

'I missed too many last year.'

Murray kicked out at an empty crisp packet on the flagstones and didn't answer. As they cornered the Chemistry building Nick glanced at his wristwatch.

'Look, I've not got long. I'll see you tonight.'

'And if you start feeling weird again you'll go to the Med Centre, right?'

'What is this? Are you trying to imitate my mother?'

They laughed and parted company. Nick had only gone a few paces when a theatrically falsetto voice pierced the general hubbub.

'And change your underclothes. They're *dis-gusting*.'

Waving two fingers in the air, Nick kept walking.

Leaving the ivy-covered walls of the older buildings, he passed alongside the grey concrete rear of the Law block and on to the narrow path that wound through the thin scrub birch separating the campus proper from the first of the public roads.

When he'd come to Hull he'd been pleased that the original blood-red brick buildings, with their small-paned windows and incongruously

peaked attic rooms, had made up such a small proportion of the university's campus. A year on he was grateful for the trees, and for the forethought of those who had planted them in every conceivable nook and cranny. In spring the squares were ankle deep in pink and white blossoms. Now, on breezy days, leaves sang out their death rattle as they clung to swaying branches, or ran before him, crisp and golden, to be caught in a root and crushed underfoot. Concrete, no matter the style, was concrete, stark and uncompromising. Ivy would never grow up the walls of the Law block, but the birds sang in the trees below it, and the hedgehogs grubbed in their roots to scurry across to the gardens opposite as soon as the traffic quietened.

He was becoming sentimental, there was no denying it. Emotional even. Perhaps Murray was right, perhaps he was sickening for something. Or perhaps he was just wallowing in his own self-pity. No matter how he tried to keep his thoughts in check, Murray's voice was in his head telling him of the tan Louise was sporting, and the memory of that never-changing, ever-cheerful voicemail message kept kicking into play, laughing at him.

The gate was stuck again. He released the latch and pushed at it with his thigh, managing only to reinforce the bruise he had been cultivating since taking up residence at the house. He freed the latch, this time lifting the gate clear of the sneck. It swung easily on freshly greased hinges.

'Sodding thing,' Nick muttered, and he pressed it back further, catching it securely in the rose bushes which separated the small front garden from its neighbour.

Gaining a house on Salmon Grove had been the finest coup of his entire first year. The hall of residence he had been allocated had been no dump, of course. With its park-like gardens and in-house entertainment committee it had been all he had imagined university life to be. The problem was that it was situated two miles from the main campus, and, as the year progressed, those two miles had lengthened into twenty and then into two hundred. At Salmon Grove he could fall out of bed straight into a lecture and be back before the sheets had cooled.

Closing the door behind him, he waited for his vision to become accustomed to the gloom. The only window in the hallway was above the solid front door, and the mature trees growing out of the pavement restricted the light as well as screening the concrete edifices across the road. Walking into the handlebars of Maureen's bicycle had been an incident he did not wish to repeat, though why she insisted on having a bicycle when she was less than a stone's throw from the campus was

beyond him.

Her bike wasn't there, only a bulging black dustbin liner which he purposely ignored. Both downstairs doors were closed, and there seemed to be no movement coming from above. Hopefully the other occupants were out and he had the house to himself. Separating his room key on the ring, he laid a hand on the banister and dragged himself up the stairs.

The door swung back revealing his front bedroom exactly as he had left it earlier that morning, hardly changed from the Saturday before when he'd double-parked the rental and heaved the contents of his life up the stairs. He would have to empty the boxes soon; he could hardly remember what was in them.

The unmade bed beneath the window looked inviting, and if he was going down with something it made sense to get it out of his system with as little hassle as possible. It also made sense not to rock the boat, especially after the one-to-one he'd endured at the end of the previous semester, and the lies he'd told back home.

'So how did Murray do? Is he struggling, too?'

His parents had sat together on the sofa. He couldn't remember them ever sitting together on the sofa before. The sofa had always been for him and his sisters.

'Everybody has found it hard. It's just so different. You think it's simply going to be an extension of 'A' levels, but it's not.'

His father had remained tight-lipped, his mother quietly understanding. He would have felt better if it had dissolved into a row. And then, of course, had come the bombshell.

'You said that you hadn't much studying to do over the summer. Your father's managed to get you a job, holiday relief at the plant.'

All he had said was, 'Oh.'

What the hell could he have said? His mother had taken on extra hours to help with his student loan, and his sisters had made it perfectly plain that they held him responsible for their not having a holiday. To cap it all Louise had dropped him like a steaming turd and was now sporting a suntan that had made Murray's eyes water.

Stripping off his running gear, he grabbed a still-damp towel and walked on to the landing and into the shower room.

It was good to have a shower with an uninterrupted flow of water. No one filling kettles or flushing toilets. No sudden spikes in the temperature, freezing one moment, scalding the next. He rested his forehead against the cool tiles, letting the water play directly on to his neck and shoulder. He had jarred them badly when he had collided with the wall, but had not realised how stiff the muscles had grown. The

particles of red brick embedded in his skin were a surprise, too. He must have hit the wall with the power of an express.

Water poured on to his head, fanning his hair, running along his cheekbones and down his nose. He opened his mouth to breathe, and his breathing became slower as the warmth of the water lulled him. The building steam felt damp in his lungs, but soothing, the noise of the jet hypnotic in its unending hiss.

He snapped round the dial and the water shut off. How long had he been standing there? His fingertips looked like gnarled tree bark. He pushed his hair from his face and blinked. He was supposed to be at a seminar.

Towelling himself as he went, he dripped his way back across the landing to probe the discarded paper cups on his study table for his wristwatch. Five minutes. *Shit.*

The clothes he'd discarded the night before still lay at the foot of the bed and he dragged them on, regardless of how they looked. His socks were stiff, but he had no idea of where a clean pair was and no time to search one out. The orange wallet file shrieked at him from across the room like a well wound alarm clock. There wasn't much in it: some paper and a pen, a few notices he'd picked up, a copy of his timetable, but it looked good, looked as if he'd got his act together. He laid a hand on it, grabbed his keys and slammed the door behind him.

'So nice of you to join us, number 28. I hope we haven't dragged you away from anything interesting.'

Nick stood in the doorway looking across the heads of the students to the lecturer, one hand on her hip, the other knuckles down on the table beside her. It didn't seem like a good idea to answer, especially as he couldn't remember her name. The door behind him opened with a groan of its spring and the lecturer's gaze realigned on a point beyond his shoulder.

'Number 29! Well, *hello* there.'

Jesus, was she really counting them in? Nick took the opportunity to reach one of the vacant seats in the centre of the group. Almost immediately he realised his mistake. Sunshine was pouring through the skylight with the efficiency of greenhouse glass. He looked around for a seat in the shadows, but they had all been taken.

'For those of you who have forgotten, or for those who simply never bothered to find out, my name is Janet Duval. I am on an exchange from Lancaster, and it is my dubious pleasure to be acquainted with you for the entire academic year. I am reliably informed that my bark is

worse than my bite, but I feel it only fair to warn you, especially the late-comers, that a full series of rabies shots may be considered beneficial.

‘I expect full sittings at my seminars and my tutorials. Those who feel their eyesight too precious to waste upon the set texts will also find themselves at a distinct disadvantage as questions will be asked during meetings, including this one.

‘You are now free, for fifteen seconds, to gasp, groan or wince, whichever is your desire, and then we shall make a start.’

There was a distinct lack of gasps or groans, Nick noticed, but a marked amount of shifting about in seats. And then the door opened and Janet Duval raised an overly benign smile and diverted her attention from the group.

Nick recognised most of the people within his line of vision, though there seemed to be a higher than usual proportion of mature students in this class. He had expected *Myth & Reality of the American West* to be one of the less daunting options, but Janet Duval was making it perfectly clear that she had written scripts for Billy the Kid.

Perhaps her attitude would prove to be a mixed blessing. On secondment for a year, it seemed she was determined to make her mark. If she made it on him hopefully he would forgo a repeat of the interview he had endured the previous semester, and he would have something cheery to email home.

The seminar room dimmed and Nick let out a slow stream of breath, angling his head to glance at the skylight. A cloud was drifting across the sun, an orange corona sparkling round the edge of the grey mass. He hoped that it would be a big cloud, twenty minutes’ worth at least. His brains felt as if they were being fried.

Luxuriating in the drop in temperature, he took time out from listening to Duval to review the jottings he had made. He hadn’t read the books, of course — Damn! He had a lot of reading to do — but it was probable that few on the course had, either. He felt reasonably safe in that area.

The questions began without any preamble, and bore no relevance to what had gone before. Duval was testing the general climate, and no one was offering a reply. Each silence was met with a hardening of her expression, a stiffening of her angular frame. Nick sagged into his chair. She was going to point to someone and demand an answer, he could tell. It wasn’t going to be him.

‘Does this mean that not one of you, *not one of you*, has the guts to

chance an answer? Not even to get the rest off the hook?’

The silence seemed interminable.

‘The consensus of opinion, then, is for extra assignments?’

There was a general shuffling and clearing of throats, and then Duval’s attention focused near the front and the disquiet subsided. Some stupid sod had offered themselves as a sacrificial lamb. Nick breathed a sigh of relief.

The voice was female. Nick had no idea what she said. All he caught was an aural impression, a richness in the timbre. He eased himself to one side, trying to locate her through the line of shoulders and heads. What he noticed was Duval’s reaction, her surprise and the softening of her features. Dear God, had their sacrificial lamb turned into a saviour?

‘Very good,’ Duval was murmuring. ‘I trust everyone heard that?’

There was a hum of agreement around Nick. It threw him for a moment. He hadn’t heard the answer; how could those behind him? And then he realised that standing so close to the abyss the group would have agreed with anything the lecturer offered.

Duval was partway through another question. Nick had missed the beginning — something about fur trading companies. No one was going to answer again.

But Duval hardly waited. Her gaze drifted across the group to return to the oracle before her. Nick made a concerted effort to see who it was, and caught a glimpse of shoulder-length auburn hair and part of a green sweater. The sound of her voice swirled around him, its peaks and troughs enticing in their clarity. It brought to mind the rim of a crystal glass being smoothed by a damp fingertip; more than a note, but not quite a tune.

Duval was nodding and smiling, smiling not only at the girl but at the entire group. Who was this wonder? She had Duval eating out of her hand.

Nick pulled his chair to the left, its rubber feet squealing across the glossy tiles. The student beside him frowned, but Duval didn’t seem to notice. She was into a new phase of her lecture and heads bowed as notes were scribbled. Nick gained an uninterrupted view of the auburn hair and green sweater.

He tried to match a face to the outline, but no memory would stir itself. His gaze followed the gentle ripples of her hair from crown to shoulder blade and he wondered if it was naturally wavy or if she spent each breakfast clutching a hot brush the way his younger sister did. Her hand reached out to tuck a lock behind her ear, but her action gave him no more sight of her face. She touched her pens, the books and papers

beside her. The hand withdrew.

Last year's English options? He didn't think so. One of the rugby groupies? Definitely not. With hair that colour he would have remembered. It was very likely that he didn't know her at all — yet he felt there was something familiar. He caught himself with a snort. Perhaps he just wished there was. Sporting a redhead on his arm would certainly put Louise's nose out of joint.

The cloud broke and sunshine poured unrestrained through the skylight. There was general unrest as the sudden brightness bounced off white paper and polished tiles. Nick blinked, squinting to bring his vision back into focus. The girl's hair was alight, sparkling through shades of autumn with each slight movement of her head. Duval was speaking to her.

'Can you give me three out of three?'

The girl was wriggling in her chair, small agitated movements. Duval had caught her unawares. Nick hadn't heard the question, either. He looked to Duval, hoping that she would repeat it. She didn't. She let the girl squirm.

'Er, Catlin. Er, *Notes and Manners on...* er... It's a two volume set.'

Hearing her properly took Nick by surprise. Her voice held none of the authority or rhythm he had anticipated. It didn't seem to fit with what had registered before.

Duval was only marginally disappointed in the answer. 'At least you know to which books I'm referring.' She turned her attention to the group. 'Which is more than can be said for the rest of you.'

There was a crash. Eyes turned, including Duval's. The girl with the auburn hair slid off her seat to retrieve her dropped file. Duval's voice demanded attention, but it became a drone to Nick as he watched the girl reach under her chair to reclaim an errant pen. Her outstretched fingers curled around the ballpoint and hesitated. Nick lifted his gaze up the sleeve of her sweater. Half hidden behind the chair she was looking at him, her expression full of doubt, her pale features framed by the corona of flaming hair which undulated through shades of amber and gold, russet and hazel, individual locks lifting from her shoulders.

They were lifting.

Nick stared in disbelief. Tendrils were lifting and swaying away from her head, fanning out as if caught in a shifting field of static, weaving and twisting, mesmerizing in its intricate pattern.

She moved, turned away, sitting in her seat with her back to him. Her hair fell in ripples from her crown in a palette of autumn colours, but not a tendril stirred against the pull of gravity. Another cloud passed across the sun plunging the room into a dull opacity. Nick fought to

refocus his vision. When colours became clear again her hair had been leached of its fire.