

Prologue

Imagine. A young assassin, no more than a boy really, is lying carefully hidden in the long green and black bulrushes that grow in great profusion along the rivers of the Vallombrosa. He has been waiting for a long time but he is a patient creature in his way and the thing he waits for is perhaps more precious to him than life. Beside him are a bow of yew and arrows tipped with black country steel capable of penetrating even the costliest armour if you're close enough. Not that there will be any need for that today because the young man is not waiting for some rascal deserving of his murder but only a water bird. The light thickens and the swan makes wing through the rooky wood, the cawing crows complaining bitterly at the unfairness of her beauty as she lands upon the water like the stroke of a painter's hand upon a canvas, direct and beautifully itself. She swims with all the elegance for which her kind is famous, though you will never have seen movement quite so graceful in such still and smoky air on such steeple grey water.

Then the arrow, sharp as hate, shears through the same air she blesses and misses her by several feet. And she's off, web strength along with her grace convey her whiteness back into the air and away to safety. The young man is standing now and watching the swan escape.

'I'll get you next time you treacherous slut!' he shouts and throws down the bow, which alone of all the instruments of death (knife, sword, elbow, teeth) he has never been able

to master and yet is the only one that can give him hope of restitution for his broken heart. But not even then. For though this is a dream, not even in his dreams can he hit a barn door from twenty yards. He wakes and broods for half an hour. Real life is careful of the sensitivities of desperadoes but even the greatest scourge, and Thomas Cale is certainly one of those, can be mocked with impunity in his nightmares. Then he goes back to sleep to dream again of the autumnal leaves that strewed the brooks in Vallombrosa, and the great white wings beating into swirls the early-morning mist.