

CHAPTER ONE

THE BLACK PRINCE OF PADDENBURG

Lydia Wilde bolted upright. Where was she? Her eyes focused and traced the familiar outline of her closet, the drape of heavy curtains. She was safely in her bedchamber. She raised a hand to her forehead and felt the slick of perspiration and the heat there. It had spread through her entire body, and her chemise was soaked through. She pushed back the heavy bed-covers and stepped down on to the floor.

She felt giddy and unsure of her reality. Had she actually witnessed her brother's execution or had it just been a vivid dream?

Lydia reached for the black-glass carafe on the bedside cabinet and, not bothering to decant the water into its matching glass, raised it to her lips and swallowed thirstily. Only then did she feel her heartbeat slow, the heat begin to dissipate.

I'm here in the royal bedchamber in the Black Palace of Paddenburg, she told herself. It was only a nightmare. The same nightmare that stalks me every single night. Logan is safe. And I will hold him in my arms again soon.

She set the carafe back down on the cabinet and turned to see if her sudden movements had roused Prince Henning from his slumber, but there was no familiar rise and fall of bedcovers on the other side of the bed. Lydia was alone in the royal bedchamber. She felt grateful for that. It was better Henning didn't see her in such a state. But where had he gone to, and what was he doing, at such an early hour? Had his torturous insomnia got the better of him once again?

She ran a hand through her short bob of hair. It was still a shock to feel cool air along the nape of her neck, but Henning had desired her hair to be cropped like this. She remembered him sitting across from her, that first time, watching intently as her lady's maid had taken merciless scissors to Lydia's long tresses. As the twin blades had moved across one another, their brutal scrape had sent a shiver down

the length of Lydia's spine. 'Short enough, Your Infinite Highness?' the maid had asked Prince Henning – no care for Lydia, who might as well have been a yew hedge. Each time, the Prince had given a small, silent shake of his head. And in answer, another inch of her beautiful black hair had tumbled to the rug below, dead as an autumn leaf. Lydia had never felt more naked in her life.

Shivering at the memory, she paced towards one of the pairs of heavy brocade curtains which shielded each of the bedchamber's seven windows and drew them back, conscious that her palms were still slick with sweat. Next, she turned her attention to the thick wooden shutters. Henning couldn't even contemplate sleep without the room being as dark as the grave. It would have been Lydia's preference to keep the curtains parted and the shutters on their hinges, in order to be woken softly, sensuously, by the first rays of the morning sun but, from the time she had first arrived in Prince Henning's bedchamber, she had been made aware that this – along with certain other matters of personal taste – was not up for discussion or compromise.

The shutters open, Lydia unlatched the window and felt the air on her face, neck and shoulders. She leaned forward, grateful for its cool caress, and gazed down on the intricate formal gardens to the rear of the palace. Even from this bird's eye view, the mazes remained as resistant to comprehension as the twists and turns in Prince Henning's and his brother Prince Ven's sinuous minds.

Suddenly – almost as if her thinking of the two Princes had summoned them on to the stage-set below – she saw two flashes of white, moving within the contours of the dark green maze. Then, close by one of the white flashes, a burst of silver. Henning and Ven, stripped bare to the waist, swords in hand, were stalking each other through the Grand Maze. It was a favourite game of theirs, though to call it a game was to diminish the seriousness with which each Prince approached the challenge.

One of the white flashes suddenly moved: Ven was running. True to form, he had good instincts – he was close upon his brother. She wondered if he could hear his brother's heavy breath on the other side of the perfectly tended hedge. She saw the

glint of light on Ven's sword; she thought of the maid's scissors. A fresh shiver snaked down her spine. As Ven closed in to claim his victory, she turned away.

Lydia was sitting at a chair by the window – washed, perfumed and dressed in a silk robe patterned with peacocks – when the door was flung open and Henning strode into the room. His eyes were wild and there were cuts all across his pale chest and muscled arms. The stink of sweat emanating from him spoke not only of his recent labours but of the copious amounts of wine he had imbibed the night before.

His lips settled on hers and then he ran his fingers slowly, possessively, through her hair. Stepping back, he stood proudly over her, fists on his hips.

'These games you play,' she said. 'One day, you'll go too far.' He laughed. 'Don't you want to know who won?'

'I'm guessing it was you,' she said.

'Of course it was me! He thought he had me, but that was just what I wanted him to believe.' Henning ran his fingers along the nape of her neck – it felt like a spider scurrying across her flesh.

Henning leaned down until his face was level with hers. Lydia's nostrils flared at the tang of his sweat. 'Does anything matter to you more than winning?' she asked.

He laughed. 'Lydia, my precious Lydia. There's nothing more important than winning. Don't pretend you don't agree.'

She shrugged.

'The higher the stakes, the sweeter the victory.' He folded his arms across his grime- and sweat-streaked chest. 'You of all people know that.' Now he reached out for her pale hand and placed it on his blood-nicked left pectoral. She could feel, beneath the thin veil of his skin, the wild thumping of his heart. Instinctively, she

began to withdraw her hand, but he brought across his own and trapped hers, pressing her flesh against his. 'Winning is the only thing that makes us feel alive,' he rasped. 'It's what binds you and I together. It is the star that steers us towards our future.'

Lydia smiled awkwardly and drew away her hand, wiping it dry on her silk robe. 'You stink like a wild boar. For good- ness' sake, go and take a bath!'

'I've been looking all over the palace for you,' Lydia said later that morning, as she approached Henning at the periphery of the royal aviary.

No answer.

She stepped closer but not too close. The door to one of the aviary's enclosures was open; the one belonging to Prince Ven's much-prized golden eagle. Ven was inside, communing with his beloved creature. The eagle was sitting on a steel facsimile of a branch, its vast wings extended as he stroked the bird with his bare fingers.

Lydia felt a shudder course through her. She'd heard the Princes' stories about how this eagle had plucked out the eyes of one unfortunate steward and employed its claws to scratch the face of another, scarring him beyond all recognition. In Lydia's view, the bird should be destroyed rather than cherished. But she knew that this was not an argument worth voicing: it would only serve to widen the gulf between herself and Prince Ven, which, in turn, would not play well for her relationship with Henning.

'Come on!' Ven turned to face Henning with a smile.

Ven was strikingly good-looking – far more handsome than his older brother. Where Henning's face was inclined to be red and puffy, Ven's was all sharp lines and skin the colour of freshly drawn milk; where Henning's hair was tufty at best, and thinning over his crown, Ven's was sleek and black, like the wings of a raven. But there were reasons she had chosen Henning, she reminded herself. His looks, or lack of them, were of little consequence.

She watched now as Ven beckoned his brother into the enclosure. Her first instinct was to cry out to Henning, to warn him to be careful. But she bit her lip, watching fearfully as Henning entered the cage.

He was carrying a neat scroll of parchment. Intrigued, she dared to step a pace closer. Ven reached out and passed a small, tubular container to Henning, all the time talking soothingly to his monstrous bird.

Henning opened the tube and carefully inserted the scroll.

Lydia saw that there was a clip at one end of the canister, and Ven now used it to attach the tube to a ring which circled the eagle's left leg.

Henning retreated from the enclosure with Ven following, the giant eagle resting on his leather-clad forearm. Frozen to the spot, Lydia realised how strong Ven must be to carry the bird without so much as a flinch or a tremble.

Outside the enclosure, the bird extended its vast wings once more. Ven was holding the eagle on a thin, leather rein, which he held gently in his fist. As a new coldness ran through her, he let the rein drop from his hand. The bird was released.

'Fly!' Ven cried. 'Carry our missive across the borders!'

The bird soared into the air. Lydia let out a small cry as it climbed quickly to the height of a kite-string's length above them.

Only then did she dare to move closer to the two Princes. 'What was that note?' she asked.

Ven did not respond. He was standing rapt, his head thrown back, eyes brimming with purpose as he watched the flight of his precious eagle over the dark roof of the palace.

Henning turned to meet Lydia's gaze.

'What have you done?' she asked.

Henning smiled, his eyes dancing with light. 'Something,' he told her, 'that will change everything.'

Now Ven turned his own gaze towards her. In spite of the crucial physical differences between himself and his brother, their eyes were the same – cold and hard and black as obsidian, as if the Princes themselves had been hewn from the same rock as their forbidding palace. In Ven's case, the hardness of his eyes was balanced by the somewhat feminine set of his lips. These now broke into a soft smile as he opened them to speak.

'First Archenfield,' he said. 'Then the rest of the Thousand Territories.'

TO JARED, PRINCE OF ALL ARCHENFIELD,

YOUR PRINCEDOM IS IRREDEEMABLY WEAKENED. PADDENBURG
IS READY TO TAKE OVER FULL CONTROL. YOU HAVE SEVEN DAYS TO
SURRENDER YOUR LANDS AND PEOPLE TO US.

IF YOU FAIL TO SUBMIT BY SUNSET ON THE SEVENTH DAY, OUR ARMIES
WILL BREAK THROUGH YOUR BORDERS.

SHOULD ANYTHING HAPPEN TO LOGAN WILDE DURING THIS TIME, WE
WILL KNOW ABOUT IT AND OUR ARMIES WILL ARRIVE EVEN SOONER.

ENJOY YOUR CORONATION AND THE FACT THAT YOURS WILL BE THE
SHORTEST REIGN OF ANY PRINCE IN THE HISTORY OF ARCHENFIELD.

YOURS IN AMBITION AND ANTICIPATION,

PRINCE VEN AND PRINCE HENNING OF PADDENBURG