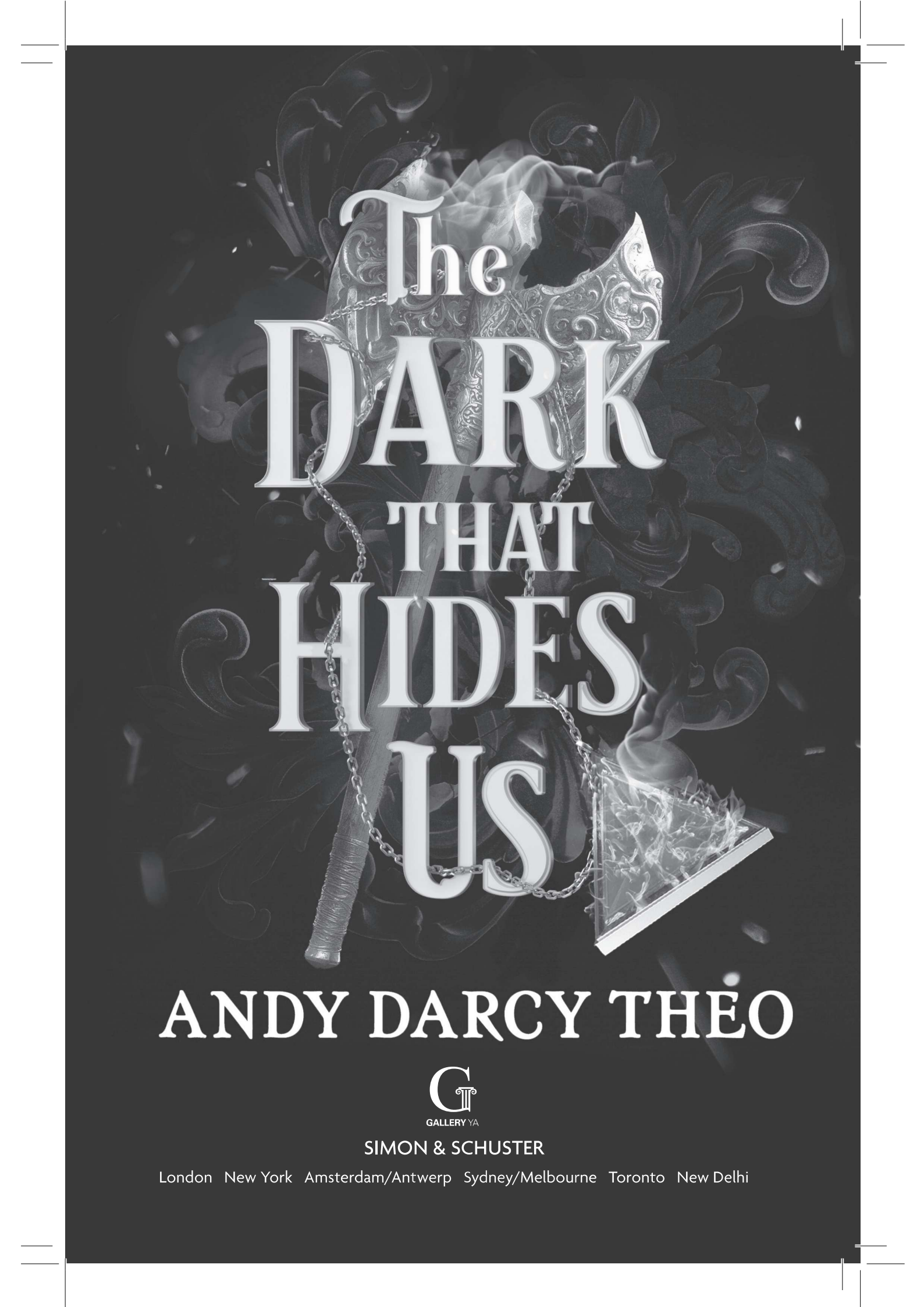


The
DARK
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US





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ANDY DARCY THÉO



GALLERY YA

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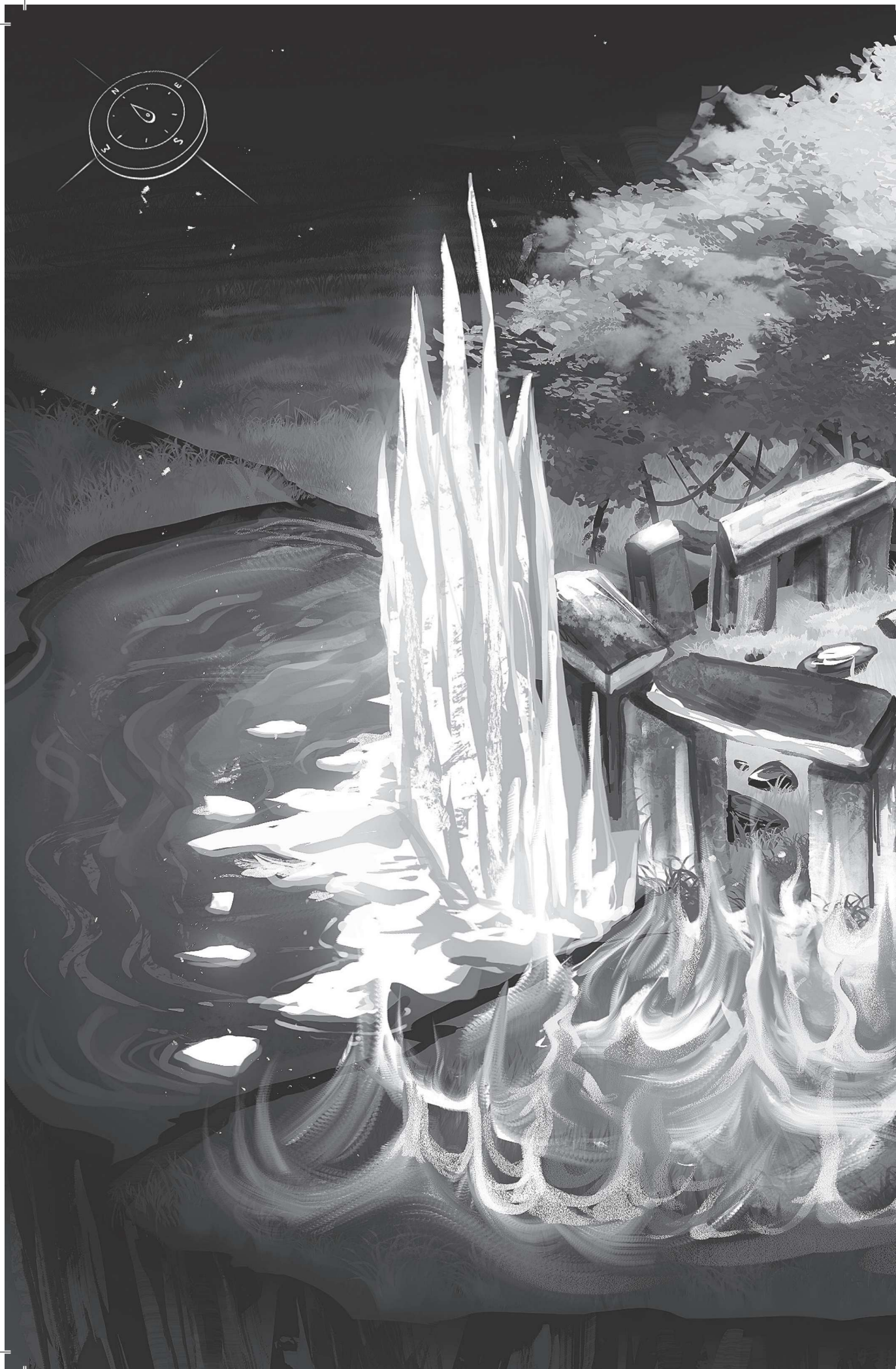


*For anyone who has ever felt like giving up,
but was too stubborn to quit.*



AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story is one of battle. A battle to persevere, to seek light, even when all we see and feel is darkness. It is a battle that many of us will face, or have faced already, at some point in our lives. Some of these wars are fought on the surface for all to see, but for the majority, they are waged far beneath the surface. If there is one thing you take from reading this book, it is to ensure that, no matter how fierce the opponent, you do not yield, and should you fall, you get back up and continue the fight.







PROLOGUE

Eleven years ago

Blaise Ademola's parents were certain their son was the happiest and bravest boy there was, completely and utterly fearless.

They were wrong.

Blaise was petrified of *everything*.

So when he heard a person in his house whose voice he didn't recognise, well after midnight, Blaise flew out of his bed and dashed into the wardrobe. He pulled the door almost shut, plunging himself in darkness, save for the small nightlight in the corner of his bedroom, which illuminated the walls with an orange-red glow.

Blaise had always been scared of the dark; the only fear his parents didn't attempt to condition out of him. Even in their bedrooms, where they slept separately due to his father's snoring, they themselves left a small light on. It made Blaise feel like he wasn't the only one who felt uneasy in the shadows.

Everything else, however, all of Blaise's other fears, those were things they did not stand for.

Most recently, his mother had caught him squirming at the sight of a dead pigeon on the side of the road. The next day, when he came home from primary school, there it was, its bloody entrails sprawled out on the patio garden. Blaise had

been forced to sit there and stare at it for hours on end until he said it didn't bother him any more.

'Face your fears.'

That's what they drilled into him. It seemed like that was the only thing they were concerned with. So long as he ate what they told him to, slept when they instructed and kept up a rigorous level of daily physical activity, even on the days he was unwell, Blaise's parents took very little interest in their only son.

If Blaise ever complained or asked any questions, they would tell him that the strongest little boys were beautiful and fearless. Nothing more and nothing less. After a while, Blaise learned to stop asking questions; being strong and beautiful and fearless seemed to be the only things worth caring about. The only things of any value.

But Blaise didn't feel fearless most of the time. Certainly not now, as his body trembled inside the narrow wooden wardrobe. He allowed the clothes on their hangers to drape over his head, another layer of concealment. If he listened closely, he could make out a conversation between two people.

He could hear his mother. Blaise's small shoulders relaxed slightly with relief. *Who is she talking to?* It wasn't Blaise's father; the accent was similar, but the voice sounded deeper. Blaise hadn't ever heard anyone else who spoke like his parents, not even people who said they were born in Nigeria where his parents said they were raised. Even in the Nollywood films they sometimes watched, no one sounded quite like them.

Why is a man in our house so late? Blaise's parents wouldn't even let him invite friends over, not that he had many.

'May I see the boy?' asked the man from downstairs. There was a creak from the bottom step beneath his weight.

‘He will be sleeping now,’ came his mother’s reply. ‘But you may look.’

She sounds different, Blaise thought, although he couldn’t describe how or why. All he knew was that he would be in big trouble if she caught him awake.

As Blaise heard footsteps approaching, he tore out from the wardrobe and clambered into his bed. He had barely thrown the duvet over him and shut his eyes by the time the bedroom door opened gently, flooding his room with light from the hallway.

Blaise’s heart thumped in his chest, but he urged himself to stay still. He was already sweating under the covers, his body temperature hot at the best of times, but he couldn’t risk his mother catching him out.

The man let out a soft gasp. Blaise could feel him drawing nearer, blocking out the hallway light. *He smells of firewood*, Blaise thought.

‘Beautiful,’ said the man under his breath in awe.

‘He really shines in the summer season,’ Blaise’s mother reported. ‘His seventh birthday is approaching soon. We work every day to build his strength and remove his fears for when the time comes.’

‘He looks strong,’ the man agreed, his voice so low that Blaise could barely hear it. Blaise felt a hand touch his pyjama top and he prayed his face didn’t portray his startle. The neckline of his top was pulled down slightly to reveal the deep-red triangular amulet that rested on his chest: the necklace he wore every day; the necklace his parents forbade him from ever taking off. ‘Beautiful,’ the man said again.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he let go of

Blaise's top. 'You have done an incredible job, My Queen. I consider it an honour to have laid eyes upon him.'

'An honour you must keep to yourself,' hissed Blaise's mother in response. 'Should anyone know you have been here and met the boy, should the king find out, my hand would be forced.'

There was a rush of air. Had the man bowed to her? 'Of course, My Queen. I promise to speak no word of this encounter to the tribe.'

Blaise needed air. He could feel himself wet all over with sweat. He needed them to leave so that he could breathe properly. There was so much he didn't understand: who was this man and what did he look like? Why was he calling Blaise's mother a queen? What was a tribe? And why was he here? But most importantly, when would he leave?

As if he'd willed it, he felt his mother and the man withdraw from his bedside and heard the door open and close again. Their voices grew muffled, barely audible over his own anxious breathing. His mother sounded like she was giving the man orders and he was murmuring in agreement. Blaise heard his mother's faint laugh, or at least he assumed that was what it was because it wasn't a noise she'd ever made with him or his father.

Blaise wondered if his father knew this man. A friend from work? Blaise's parents often went on extended trips that took them away from him for weeks at a time. Most of the time, one went and the other stayed, but there was one time when both of his parents had gone and Blaise had been so overwrought with the fear that he had been abandoned that he hadn't left his room for a whole day, not even to go to the toilet. '*Work*,' they

had said when he asked, and then they shut the conversation down and swiftly moved on as if it had never happened.

Blaise could no longer hear them. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep until the man was gone, so he crept out of bed and padded to the door. It hadn't been shut properly. All he needed to do was press his fingertips against it and push it lightly to see out.

He could see two figures at the top of the stairs. At first Blaise thought they were hugging, arms wrapped tightly around each other and bodies pressed close. But then the angle of their heads shifted slightly.

And kept shifting. Over and over again, their faces squished together, mouths slightly ajar every time they met. Blaise stared in horror, unable to move. Each kiss was hungry. Passionate. Like they would stop breathing if the other pulled away.

Emotions that Blaise didn't recognise flooded through him, making his eyes burn. Many of them he had never felt before and didn't have names for. He would later learn what they were: shame, anger, confusion, embarrassment, fear. Always fear.

Blaise blinked away tears and when his vision cleared, he saw that his mother's eyes were open and were staring straight at him. He stumbled back, retreating into his room. His mother mumbled something to the man and a moment later, the door to her bedroom clicked as it shut.

'Blaise, what are you still doing up?'

Blaise backed into his bed, his heel kicking the sturdy bedframe as his mother entered the room. She wore a long, colourful dress he hadn't seen before. An explosion of reds and oranges and yellows hanging loosely from her tall, muscular

frame. He noted the bright lines on her face and thought it looked a bit like face paint, although he didn't know what all the swirls and points were meant to make her look like. Great golden chains dangled from her neck, decorated with numerous jewels that glinted in the glow of his nightlight.

She looks like a firework, Blaise thought. No wonder the man had called her a queen. She looked like one.

'I asked you a question,' she said, stepping closer.

'I couldn't sleep,' Blaise replied, his voice coming out high-pitched. He placed his hand on the mattress behind him to steady himself. 'I heard a man. I thought he was Father. Who was he?'

'A friend,' she said noncommittally. 'Let's get you into bed; you're up far later than you are allowed. We've got a big day tomorrow, lots of walking and climbing.'

Blaise got beneath the covers, but he stayed upright. 'Why were you kissing him?'

A look passed across his mother's face, one he couldn't decipher. 'What did I tell you about asking questions?'

Any other time, Blaise would have dropped it and done as he was told, but he couldn't shake the unease he felt in his gut at what he had seen. He felt deeply as though it was something he shouldn't have. He didn't know why it made him want to cry.

Questions clamoured inside his head; questions he was too afraid to ask out loud.

Why are you dressed like that? When's Father home? Do you love him?

Blaise's mother knelt down beside his bed. She rested her hands against his shoulders and pressed gently until he was

lying down flat. He thought she would be cross, but she wasn't frowning. In fact, her face looked sad almost.

'Love isn't as simple as you think, Blaise. Not for adults. You won't ever understand – love is not important to you. You are meant for greater things. You are to forget tonight and all that you saw and never speak a word of it again. Is that understood?'

The tone of her voice was one Blaise knew better than to argue with. He nodded, the fear swirling in his chest, tears pricking at his eyes.

'Good,' she said. Her hand reached towards him and Blaise thought, *hoped*, it was to caress his face. Instead it went to the fiery amulet at his chest. She twirled it between her long fingers, inspecting the stone with fascination and wonder. She had never looked at *him* that way.

'Good,' she repeated, letting the amulet fall between her fingers. She rose to her feet and looked at her son. 'You are so pretty and so strong, Blaise. You are lucky: that is all the world will ever want or need from you.'