

# The Crystal Stair

Charles Coleman Finlay & Rae Carson Finlay

An aged vaim stood guard in the elegantly arched doorway of the concubines' chamber, sunken into his robes like a shriveled piece of fruit; the sea breeze that snaked through the honeycombed halls of the tower carried his death stench to Khatire's delicate nose. She lifted her hand, as smooth as the stones polished by the waves, and held it thoughtfully to her mouth, pinching her nose shut surreptitiously. In a hundred-fifty or two hundred years, long after she was dead and her body devoured by the spinrag, her son could be standing there, his rotting flesh locked to living spirit to serve his father, his emperor, and god. The three were, after all, one. Or, her son might be anointed to climb the Crystal Stair. He might, if Khatire schemed well and used all her talents, become emperor and god himself. She had stared too long. The vaim lifted his cowed head in her direction. His red eyes burned beneath the shadow of his hood and a chuckle escaped the decayed meat of his mouth. A voice from the far end of the room startled her: "Khatire." It was Ankha, the emperor's head concubine, the one currently chosen to have her son attempt the stair. Khatire turned languidly. Ankha sat on a cushioned throne at the high end of the chamber, overseeing a double row of Khatire's sister-wives, each situated within her own engraved and gilded arch. Khatire's place was all the way at the end, near the door. "My lady?" Ankha lifted her chin toward the lute in Khatire's lap. "Entertain us." As one, the other concubines turned from embroidery or quiet chatter to gaze at Khatire. Nefaria, hidden deep within her archway at the foot of Ankha's pillowed throne, said, "Please, my lady, don't make the rest of us suffer simply because *you're* bored." Ankha scowled at her and waved a hand impatiently at Khatire, who obediently plucked a series of mournful minor chords on the lute strings. A melody suggested itself to her, a poignant tune of youth, beauty, and death. She experimented a little, adding fear in counterpoint. Ankha settled back in her chair and closed her eyes. A smile stretched across her statue-perfect face, a smug, fed-kitten smile that beamed familiar triumph. A triumph that Khatire understood far too well. Someone was going to die. Khatire fumbled an E-minor, inhaled deeply to still her heart, and continued to play. Her eyes darted about the room as she tried to determine which of them it would be. It relieved her to rule out the pregnant ones. The Emperor tolerated his concubines' petty assassinations, was even amused by them. But His Splendor needed children—they were his eyes and ears in the world, the vessels of his power while he remained in exile—and no one dared harm one, even unborn. Khatire dismissed the women with limited magic next, then the witless ones, and settled on two possibilities. *Lhare or Nefaria.* Lhare was a tiny white-haired girl, lovely in spite of her red-chafed skin, who sat even nearer the door. Khatire's strumming pattern softened as she watched the delicate child huddle on a red silk cushion, toes burrowed into a sheepskin. It was no secret that after each tryst with the emperor, Lhare went straight to the baths. There, she scrubbed her skin until it was as raw and bloody as if she had stood naked in a sandstorm. Naturally, he sent for her often. Ankha despised her. But Ankha seemed to despise Nefaria more. Nefaria was Khatire's chambermate, and the closest thing she had to a friend among the women. The emperor had not favored Nefaria of late—indeed, she worked hard to escape his notice—but her wit could slice stone, and she was brave enough, or foolish enough, to take cuts at Ankha. Khatire pressed down hard enough to feel the lute strings through her calluses. *Please not Nefaria.* She couldn't imagine sleeping at night without whispering to Nefaria first. A few years ago, before the birth of her son, she would have dared to intervene, maybe even used magic to keep Nefaria alive. Now, she dodged every risk. Her jaw locked. *I must stay alive for my son.* She finished her prelude and

closed her eyes to sing, reaching only for the oldest, most familiar version of the song. It seemed tragic to her that the concubines of the god-emperor of Viridis had only a lute and endless embroidery with which to amuse themselves. She wondered if that, more than anything, was why they killed each other. The resolving chord faded, and she held onto the final note, letting it linger in the air like the last light of day before the sun sank in the ocean. Silence. And then a single applause. Khatire lifted her head. There, just inside the doorway, at the arch of the fragile Lhare, stood Emperor Damijan, the god in exile. His eyes—like her son’s but for their cruelty—were sky blue and surrounded by lashes and brows so black the contrast was uncanny. A harsh jaw and black hair framed his face, which was filled, as always, with unreadable intent. Her heart beat at the base of her throat. *Heaven save me, he’s beautiful.* “That has always been my favorite song, Khatire.” She dropped her eyes. “I hope you enjoyed my performance, Your Splendor.” Heat filled her cheeks, and she instinctively twisted the fall of light around her face to disguise the blush. Khatire nearly cursed at her own stupidity. She had used magic in the concubines’ chamber! Tensed for retribution, she glanced to see if he had noticed. But he had reached down with his long fingers and stroked Lhare’s white hair as if she were a favorite dog. “Yes, even more than the song, I enjoyed the sound of your lovely voice.” “Thank you, Splendor.” “Attend me this evening.” Khatire inclined her head in perfect composure, though he had not called on her in weeks. When she looked up, he was gone. Lhare pulled a silk blanket across herself and curled into a ball among her pillows. The vaim stood wide of the door, as if to distance himself from the man it was impossible for him to ever become. “Well, well, Khatire.” Ankha’s voice, from the far end of the chamber. Khatire turned and saw the head concubine’s pretty mouth fixed in a rigid line. When Ankha was angry, the emperor’s poisoned seed revealed itself as black veins under her skin, the first lines of the soul-rot that would leave her a wasted shell long before she reached old age. “Luck is definitely yours this evening.” *Oh, gods. It was me. She was going to kill me. And the emperor has ruined her plans.* ??? The eunuch Tuamutef groomed Khatire in the readying room. He fussed and scolded with mock gravity, accompanied by the constant tinkle of the bell earrings that marked his station. Khatire sat on a cushioned stool as he massaged musky oil into her calloused fingertips and brushed her black hair until it shimmered. He’d selected a gown of gauzy aqua to set off her dusky skin and blue-green eyes. She knew that she was beautiful in it, but it felt like her death shroud. “I will light a candle to Natrix tonight and pray that you conceive,” Tuamutef told her. It was a ritual, something he said to each of the women before sending them to Damijan. “If you have an extra candle,” Khatire said, “please light it to Cerastes and pray she does not embrace me too soon.” The brush halted mid-air. He squatted to look her in the eye. “Why do you say this?” “Ankha would have killed me tonight were it not for the emperor’s desire.” Tuamutef had discovered her in the offering pens years ago, and pulled her out before slavery made her unsuitable for the emperor. After years of his painstaking preparation and instruction, the emperor claimed her and sent her to the concubines’ tower. She’d been sixteen years old. Tuamutef earned a new bedchamber for it, one with a sitting room that overlooked the sea. He studied her face. “You are sure?” She hesitated. Years of unremitting fear made her taste poison in every dish and see a knife in every shadow. But then she remembered Ankha’s smile. “I am sure.” Tuamutef set the brush down and rubbed his fleshy stomach. “Do not eat anything from the lounge or dining room. I will have food sent directly to your chamber.” “Thank you, Tuamutef.” “There will be a dagger hidden with the food. But, please!” His small eyes were plaintive. “If you are caught with it, do not tell them it was I who—” “Of course not, Tuamutef.” He paced. “And ring for me before you go to the baths. Do not go alone.” Khatire remembered Aphri’s body in the great marble pool, floating face-down, swollen and stiff. Her wet hair had hugged the surface, a shiny black starburst among the clouds of soap film. Ankha had loudly mourned the tragic accident, but before they threw the corpse to the spinrag, Khatire saw the purple finger-sized marks circling Aphri’s throat. “I will ring for you.” Tuamutef poured himself a drink of wine. When he swallowed it, he returned to massage her scalp, his touch gentle and soothing. “You must live.” He alone knew the extent of her Gift. The emperor needed a Paha Vaim, an heir powerful enough to remain whole in the

face of his father's magic instead of rotting away into a living death like all the others. Only then would Damijan's exile end and he be permitted to rejoin the other gods. Anut-Ka, Khatire's four-year-old son, might be the Paha Vaim, but it would be years before they knew for sure. Khatire performed one of her lesser tricks with light. Glittering stars rained down from the ceiling and circled Tuamutef's head. In the offering pens, she had only been able to change the color of flames, make green light dance on candletips, but it had been enough even then to draw the eunuch's attention. She wanted to see him smile, to give him something in return for the risk he was running for her. But he shook his head, almost angrily, and she blinked the lights out of existence. "You know..." he started to say.

"I know," she interrupted. If Anut-Ka had inherited her Gift, or one equally as powerful, then he might be tutored to survive the poison of bearing the blood of god. Until then, if any of the concubines with greater status and lesser magic discovered the truth of Khatire's gift, her death would be swift and certain. Revealing her talent to Damijan might only hasten her murder. He seemed to think that their competition with each other was the best way to find someone strong enough to breed his heir. He could wait for centuries, after all.

"Do not presume to be safe tonight, my dear child," Tuamutef cautioned. "Especially when you are returning from His Splendor's chambers. Ankha is clever. If you are lucky, we can announce a pregnancy a month from now, and that will gain us another year's reprieve. Until then, I will help you in any way I can." Khatire stood, the hem of the gauzy dress falling to the floor like the chains of iron fetters. "Thank you, Tuamutef." The bells on his ears already jangled down the hallway, fading away to nothing. ? ? ?

Two armed vaimen waited to escort her to the emperor. They were accompanied by one of the favored daughters, a girl no more than nine or ten, who bore a thurible that burned incense to mask their smell. The four of them paraded silently through the corridors of the concubines' tower to the Bridge of Broken Wings. They stopped at the foot of the bridge and Khatire continued alone, stepping across the gently curved arch that connected the tower to the emperor's spire. A constant wind rushed through the pointed arches formed by the wings of granite angels. Hundreds of feet below, the tide surged between the cliffs, dashing waves on the black rocks. One night, Marijan, unable to bear children and unwilling to face the emperor's tainted touch one more time, had stepped onto the ledge between two angels and leapt toward heaven. She lay shattered on the rocks below until the gulls picked clean her bones. Khatire stayed to the center of the path, following the shallow groove worn in the stone by the passage of thousands of feet, until she reached the other side and followed a short corridor to the lowest chamber of the spire. A large circular bed dominated the room, a squat platform with white drapes hanging from a pointed canopy. The room's other doorway opened onto the Crystal Stair, spiraling steps wrought by magic that burned with their own inner light. The stair led to the emperor's spire. Even the strongest vaimen grew ill after climbing the first few levels; no one but the Paha Vaim could ascend to the highest chamber. On the day that happened, the emperor's exile would end and he would take vengeance on his fellow gods.

Khatire could not think of that day without shaking. A flagon of wine rested on a small mahogany table next to the ridiculous bed. She poured a healthy amount into the jeweled goblet and then set it aside. There were slow-acting poisons that would not kill her for a day or two. Ankha's assassins could reach this far, and would, if she meant her own son to ascend those stairs. Only if Anut-ka climbed the crystal stairs would she ever be free. She pushed aside the flimsy drape and crawled onto the huge bed. A gentle caress against her cheek startled her. "Khatire." She turned over and saw the emperor's unlikely blue eyes looming over her. "Your Splendor," she breathed. Fingertips whispered down her face, her neck, to the base of her throat where they rested. His touch burned, and she wondered if this was one of his Gifts, this glamour that made her desire him so. He bent down and kissed her on the neck; his soft hair tickled her jawline. "I sense the magic in you," he whispered in her ear. "Though you keep it hidden, my clever girl." What did that mean? Would he favor her, or throw her like a bone to Anhka? "Anut-ka carries my Gift within him as well, your Splendor," she whispered, knowing it might not be true, knowing there would be no way to tell for years.

"We do not speak of my vaimen here," he said. She nodded in acceptance of his correction, and, forcing herself to relax, began to unbutton his vest. As she worked, he held her face in

deep contemplation. Something glinted in his eyes, something furtive like the cold reflective edge of a dagger in flight, but with his fingers so near her breasts, she didn't care. "You're not afraid of me, are you, clever girl?" His fingers trailed down the gauze of her gown. His hand splayed across the belly that had already given him one son. "No," she whispered truthfully, arching into the warmth of his palm. *Not now. Not like this. Only afterward, when my body is full of your poison and my soul is black with your rot.* She reached up with both hands, pulled his head down, and kissed him fiercely. ? ? ? Much later she awoke alone, both satiated and sick, in a room dark but for the cold pinprick light of the stars piercing the narrow window slits. She understood why Lhare scoured herself so brutally in the baths. The emperor's touch was a slow-working venom, a malignancy of decay that she could taste in her mouth like a burned spice. Normally, Khatire would have retired to the baths at once, accepted the pampering of the offering slaves, and then returned to her own sleeping chamber, the small room she shared with Nefaria. But as difficult as it was to accept, she knew she would never be safe anywhere in the concubines' tower again. No, if the emperor had noticed her true Gift, then others also suspected. She pushed her head back into a pillow, covering her eyes with her palms. It was almost too overwhelming to face. Then she thought of Anut-ka and blessed Natrix for giving her reason to persevere. If she could convince Ankha that she was weak, she could use the poison she had collected from the spinrag— Air stirred like a candle flame brushed by a moth's wing. Khatire sat straight up in the huge bed, every sense afire, but she searched in vain for the cause of her alarm. The air was warm, but not oppressive. A cooler, brackish breeze filtered through the open windows and bantered with the bed's silken drapes before brushing across her naked flesh. The lap and suck of the sea's breakers flirted with the castle foundation hundreds of feet below. But she discerned nothing that could have brought her to such abrupt alertness. Then, through the curtains, near the door, a nearly imperceptible lightshift. Light never deceived her. She quietly folded back the drapes. Even in the night's blue dimness she saw it, an odd shadowing on the floor below the doorframe. No one else in the tower would have understood the significance, but she was a lightbender and read the language of its flitting particles as well as she did High Corthan. Someone stood in the torchlit corridor. Khatire drifted further from realsight. Thousands of light particles darted with amazing variety. Each direction change, each nuance of hue, described the mysterious figure in the corridor beyond: a man, tall, wide, most likely hooded. Ankha must have convinced one of the vaimen to kill her. She had probably bedded the creature. Khatire eased her naked body from the bed and found the cool stone floor with bare toes. Her heart drummed in her throat, and her hands became icy strangers, but she forced herself to creep with painstaking calm to the door. When the vaim entered, she could bend the light to create darkness where she stood and then slip out behind him. She pressed her back to the sandstone wall, took a measured, silent breath. The door boasted a gilded handle, deceptively blue in the starlight. Slowly, it turned. Khatire wrapped herself in shadow. The door opened and torchlight poured into the chamber. Khatire adjusted the light furiously, like a roof shedding rain, to remain concealed. The vaim entered, skimming the floor with ghostly elegance. His cowl was dark and thick. An older vaim, then. One who needed the hood to hide his advanced rot. He paused in the doorway. His cowled head rotated, and she glimpsed the twin red glimmers of his eyes. She wished she had thought to create a lump in the bed, some illusion that she still rested there, if only to purchase a few extra seconds or a few steps head start. An odd sound came—two staccato rasps. The vaim's head turned in her direction. She didn't breathe. The noise came again, hoarse and whispery like a snuffling hound. He could smell her. *His Gift.* Whoever sent him knew her Gift, and her Gift was her only advantage. She panicked and tried to slip through the door. The vaim's arm, quick as an asp, hooked around her waist and pulled her close. The sweet scent, like fruit-glazed meat, made her gag. She stiffened in his grasp, her body tiny and vulnerable in his arms. "Come, whore, beg for your miserable life." His voice was a gleeful rasp, as sharp as the knife that he pressed against her neck. Khatire turned her head away from his cowl, from the greenish, marbled skin and the sick red eyes. Was this Anut-ka's fate? She closed her eyes and imagined her boy's sweet face, sky-eyed and chubby-cheeked, and then she thought of him

sneering at her, holding a blade to her throat, his eyes flashing from blue to fire-red. *Never.*

The vaim hesitated because she refused to respond. With a hiss, he pressed the dagger deeper, sending a trickle of blood into the hollow of her throat. Khatire ignored it, reaching frantically for the image of mistress Anka. She drew light particles to herself, washed her face in them, and sent them off in wild directions, a controlled explosion of color. She knew what the vaim would see: Anka with her dark eyes and copper hair, leering at him with desire. The dagger clattered to the stone, and the vaim lurched back, shoving her away. "My lady?" Khatire staggered free, shaping her mouth into Anka's smile, the one that meant someone was about to die. "My lady, I thought that.... In the darkness it seemed.... You have already dealt with the whore?" She nodded, not trusting herself to mimic Anka's voice. "Then I will see to her child." She froze. *Anut-Ka.* She wasn't conscious of letting her illusion slip, but as he bowed low and turned to go, the storm of flitting particles faded to realsight. He caught the subtle shift from the corner of his eye and spun back around, cloak whispering at his ankles. Khatire dropped to the floor and fumbled for the dagger. Her soft palm found the blade and she ignored the slicing pain as she grappled for the hilt. He stepped toward her, hissing in anger. Her now-slick hand wrapped around the bone handle as his skeletal fingers grasped her shoulder and the claws of his hands pierced her skin. She gathered her heels beneath her for leverage, then launched upwards, thrusting with an underhand stroke. She grunted as the point took the creature in the throat. Hot liquid, too thick for mere blood, gushed across her forearm as she drove it up into his skull. His claws released her shoulder and he crumpled to the stone floor, tearing the blade from her hand. The red lights within his cowl blinked out like drowned coals, and a final wet gasp bubbled from his body. The soggy darkness that marred his cloak spread to the floor and puddled. Stink filled the room like nectar spilled from a poisonous blossom. Khatire couldn't seem to catch her breath, afraid to swallow the fouled air. The cut in her palm throbbed like heartache. She had just killed one of the precious vaimen. In the eyes of the emperor, her life was forfeit. A dozen possible doors opened for her in that moment, but they all led to the same terrible end. She could not throw the body from the bridge. It would be spotted within an hour or two, just as Marijan's had been. She could not drag the body through the palace to the spinrag's lair. Even if she were strong enough, the smear of blood along the corridors would give her away. She couldn't conceal the corpse because of the stench. Even if she solved the problem with the body, she couldn't scrub the stains from the chamber floor before the servants arrived to change His Splendor's dirtied sheets. Not even Tuamutef would help her solve this problem. He would find another concubine to train and he would try again. All the other doors closed. Only one remained open. Her hands shaking, her body slick with sweat, she turned toward the Crystal Stair, squeezing down a sob. She had to leave the palace before the corpse was discovered. She had to take Anut-ka with her, to spare him the retribution meant for her and the life of a vaim without a mother's protection. She ran to the bed, tearing a strip from her dress to bind her bloody hand. She thought about throwing the dress across her body and decided not to. No, she would leave everything behind. It would be easier to bend the light around her if she didn't have a stray hem flapping at her heels. She stepped over the vaim's body into the doorway, then stopped. If she could not escape, she would need a different option for herself and her son. Holding her breath, she squatted next to the body and yanked the dagger from his chin. Trembling, she wiped the blade on his rich, black robes. The vaim's blood had already etched scars in the steel blade. Bone hilt in her palm, she ran naked across the bridge and entered the dimly lit corridor of the concubines' tower. A vaim guard slept near the entrance, either drugged or derelict, but she bent the light to cast an illusion of sandstone, glittering orange in the torchlight, while she hugged the far wall and eased past him. A favored daughter, delivering a carafe of wine, looked twice when Khatire used the same trick to hide again. Khatire's fist tightened around the hilt of the dagger, but duty called the small girl on. By the time Khatire reached the high tower chamber she shared with Nefaria, she was exhausted but resolute. She and Anut-Ka would be gone by morning, or they would both be dead. Khatire cracked the chamber door and then hesitated. Escape depended on secrecy and silence; Nefaria could not suspect that anything out of the ordinary had transpired. She waited until she heard her friend's steady, easy breathing, and then

she closed the door behind her, leaving it unlatched. She tiptoed to her own mattress. She put on her sleeveless night shirt, and then over it a simple lamb's wool dress with pockets big enough to hold the dagger. As she took quick stock of her meager possessions, she considered how she and her sister-wives were kept like little more than breeding cattle, two to a stall, with straw mattresses to sleep on. Only Ankha was permitted many personal possessions, and even those were few. But the concubines lived and died like mayflies compared to the length of His Splendor's existence. All the real wealth was saved for his children, especially the sons. Was she right to drag Anut-ka away from that? He could be the one anointed to ascend— *I must forget*. Escape was their only chance. She shoved the doubts aside and filled the dress's dagger-sized pockets with underclothes and stockings, a pair of slippers, the only other dress that she could wad up small enough to fit. She put a larger dress on over the lamb's wool. The next part was the most dangerous, because there was no way to do it in absolute silence. She crouched beside her bed and lifted the corner of the mattress. Her fingers found the tear that she had carefully made in the fabric, and she slid her hand through the rustling straw to collect her secret possessions, the things she was not meant to own: a silk cloth wrapped around bits of jerky and dried fruit, saved for when she feared poison too much to eat from the common kitchen; gold coins, spilled from the pockets of ambassadors given ease among the cushions of His Splendor's cast-off concubines; a tiny vial of diluted spinrag venom. The straw scratched at her skin as she withdrew each item. Over her shoulder, her friend still lay quietly on her mattress. Khatire sighed in relief and gathered in the particles that danced around Nefaria's face, memorizing her precious features, wasting precious seconds.

*Goodbye, Nefaria.* She rose and tiptoed toward the door. Her thoughts raced ahead, forming a plan to remove Anut-ka from the children's quarters. "I'm glad you're alive," came the whispered voice. Khatire whirled, her heart pounding in dismay. Her chambermate

pushed up to a sitting position, then yawned and stretched her slender arms toward the ceiling. "I tried to catch your eye, to warn you, but Tuamutef whisked you away before I could do anything to help." She glanced at the sky through a window too narrow to squeeze through. "You've come back early."

A half dozen explanations rolled across Khatire's tongue, but none of them would fool Nefaria. She was too clever, and too familiar with lies to be fooled by them. "Khatire?" "Nefaria, I—"

"What's wrong? Did His Splendor fall short of your expectations?" "A vaim came to kill me after the emperor left," Khatire explained, voice flat. "Oh gods," Nefaria said, hand covering her

mouth. "How did you—?" "I stabbed him. With his own knife." She lurched across the room and embraced Nefaria, wrapping an arm around the other woman, squeezing her tight. Her other hand slipped inside her dress, reaching for the dagger. She would kill again and again if she had to, in order to save her son. "I want to go with you," Nefaria whispered in her ear. Khatire's hand

jerked out of her pocket and she pulled away. "What do you mean?" "You feel like a pillow. You must be wearing everything you own." "No," she said, but it was a reflex. "Do you

remember when you were first chosen for the tower and given the seat next to the door?" Nefaria asked. "I came to comfort you, and you asked me: 'How does it feel to be a whore of the most powerful man in the world?'" "The ambassadors called you—us—that. So do the vaimen." "I remember

thinking you were too young to be so bitter. I told you we weren't whores, that we were only slaves who didn't have any choice. Do you remember what you answered?" That seemed like a very long time ago, measured in lifespans instead of years. "I said there is always a choice." Nefaria

nodded. Khatire let her vision fade to realsight so she wouldn't see Nefaria's face in the dark. "There is *always* a choice," Nefaria echoed. "And I no longer choose to be a whore." "I can't take you with me." But Khatire heard the catch in her own voice. "You must. Either take me with you or

put your hand on that dagger again and kill me before I go." "What makes you think—?"

Nefaria stood, reaching for the alcove with her clothes, dressing as she spoke. "Please, if you leave me behind, I will be discarded by the emperor as untrustworthy and given to the vaimen for questioning. When they're done using me, they'll toss me to the spinrag." Khatire didn't know if she could

shadow them both, much less all three of them once she retrieved Anut-ka. Nefaria's hands were shaking so badly, she spilled everything on the floor. "Please, for gods' sake, say something."

“Be quiet. And hurry.” She considered gathering light—enough that Nefaria might see what she was doing—but her nerves were jangled and her Gift required concentration. It would take all her focus to hide their escape, so she thought ahead to the corridors, the torches, the doorways she could use to their advantage. Nefaria dressed as Khatire had done. She held up the edge of her white gown and turned it inside out. “I sewed things into the hem. A silver necklace I grabbed from Tuamutef’s store when he wasn’t looking, that nose ring I told him I lost—” “We’re taking Anut-Ka.” Nefaria froze. She had birthed two children for the emperor, both daughters, and she had sent both of them away to the nurseries without a second thought. Some of the concubines were like that, especially those who had not given birth to sons. “We should just take all the children,” she snapped. “We can use their tiny bodies as shields when the vaimen come for us.” Khatire’s hand slipped into her dress for the hilt of the knife. “If you want to come, that is the condition.” Nefaria moved again, her shakiness gone, her gestures as sure and confident as a dancer’s once again. She tugged slippers over her feet and tied a dark scarf around her head in one efficient motion. “Of course,” she said. Then she whispered. “Are the vaimen born or made? I have always wondered.”

No answer came to Khatire’s lips. She had never thought to ask that question before and dared not pause to think about it now. Precious minutes were passing and the alarm might sound at any moment. She nudged the unlatched door open. “Stay very close so I can hide our passage. It is part of my Gift—” “I have seen you do it,” Nefaria said, stepping into the corridor after her. “Once, down by the cobbler’s workshop, when Ankha was coming. You didn’t notice me because I was already hiding from her, but I saw you step into a corner and simply... fade into the shadows. How do you do it?” “Have you ever shared your Gift with me?” Nefaria’s silence was answer enough. Khatire could see in the darkness, stepping surely in places where Nefaria might stumble. She put the other woman’s hand on her waist, to keep her close, and headed down the corridor. Khatire winced as Nefaria’s layers of silk sighed with each step. Blurring the light of their passage would be useless if others heard them. The weight of the dagger in her pocket swelled with accusation, and guilt hammered the base of her throat. *There is always a choice.* But not yet. She did not need to choose between her son’s life and Nefaria yet. ??? The concubines’ tower was a long, curving wall of window-pierced rock rising from a cliff spur that split the sea from a valley choked with broken stone. The concubines occupied the uppermost floors, the children the broad floors below that connected along a causeway to the public palace and the meadows. On the lowest level, among the foundations facing the ravine and the trash pits where the wind seldom stirred, lived the oldest vaimen, lost in rot and drowned hopes as they still clung to life. No portion of the palace was more heavily guarded than the tower. Eunuch sentries watched each stairwell and intersection. Their earrings tinkled every time they stirred, a sound that ran through the halls at night like the feet of mice. Khatire held all this in her head, but she couldn’t think about it without her stomach knotting too tight to move. *Make it through the Bitter Chamber, that is the next step.* And maybe the hardest. She and Nefaria crept along the walls, draped in the illusion of shadowed stone. Their clothing betrayed them with every step, but the crackling torches and lapping breakers outside camouflaged the murmuring fabric. They stole past one guard standing at the Hall of Blue Swallows, then passed another pacing restlessly at the top of the Bath Stairs, carefully timing their rush past him as he paused to turn. Sweat broke out on Khatire’s forehead as she maintained patient, painful concentration during each step down the stairs. They had descended several levels, passing open archways, when someone came up from the baths, rounding a corner in the stairs and startling them so suddenly Khatire dropped her illusion. They jumped back a step as the other figure did the same. “Who goes there?” the dark shape said, louder than a whisper but not loud enough to reach the guard up the stairs. Nefaria’s fist knotted in the back of Khatire’s dress. Khatire reached for her dagger, but Nefaria pulled her dress too tight to reach it. “Tuamutef,” Khatire said. The eunuch stepped forward from the shadows. The bells that dangled from his ears made no noise. He had removed the tiny clappers. Seeing her reaction, he held open his palm to show ear bells connected to a ring so he could mimic the proper sound of his passing. “When you didn’t call for me, I grew worried for you,” he said. His eyes, which had

been shifting nervously up and down the stairs, settled on Khatire and Nefaria, with all their layers of clothes. Hope sprung in Khatire's heart. It would be so much easier to reach the children's level if Tuamutef distracted the guards. He shook his head once. "Help me," Khatire whispered.

His soft features shifted from frightened anger to a sad smile. He shook his head again, this time placing his hand on her wrist. The ear bells hidden in his palm cut cold into her skin. "Only if you turn and go back to your room this minute." "I can't," she whispered. "Then I can't either," he said. "It is each to her own in the world beneath the stair." He looked past her then, as if she

were invisible to him, hidden by her Gift, and walked up the stairwell, tinkling the bells he carried. Khatire grabbed Nefaria's hand and hurried on. Tuamutef would not seek out the guards, but he would tell everything if they came to him. Tears welled in her eyes. She held them back until they seemed to fill her throat enough to choke on.

Down two more levels, they came to the thick main blockhouse of the tower. The stairwell opened on an anteroom guarded by a marble statue of Tabia, the first empress. Tabia had died in childbirth, swearing vengeance on any woman who married His Splendor after her, and so in all the centuries since he had only taken concubines. She was beautiful and terrible; the sculptor who captured the delicate structure of her bones was bold enough to reveal the cold, imperious curl of her lip. She loomed over the room as if she were still willing to crush anyone in her way—Khatire shuddered to look at her. Beyond her stood a wide archway framed in veined quartz blocks, alternating pink and yellow tones that curved toward the ceiling. The Chamber of His Splendor's Seed. The room where Damijan inspected his brood of children, where they were selected for favored status or discarded, the intersection of the concubines quarters and the children's level. His concubines called it the Bitter Chamber.

Two sentries, young, wide-eyed, and alert, stood on either side of the arch. Nefaria, as exhausted as Khatire, loosed a small gasp of despair. Khatire squeezed Nefaria's hand—it was hot and damp—and inhaled to still her own fear. Though Nefaria feared the sentries, Khatire was petrified of the prised stone. She had passed this crystal archway with its shattered torchlight only once before, more through luck than skill. She focused on the flitting

light—so fragmented!—and gradually, particle by particle, bent it to her will. If she could draw the sentries out of the arch and send them down the hallway, even a half dozen steps, she and Nefaria could slip through unnoticed. She reached behind them, shaped the light to form a human shadow, then bounced it off the sandstone.

One sentry's head snapped toward the movement, his eunuch's earring chiming. Torchlight reflected off his waxy scalp and oiled topknot. "Did you see something?"

The other sentry, equally alert after his companion's reaction, shook his head. She concentrated harder, giving the shadow more form and sending it down the opposite corridor again.

"I saw it that time," the second guard said, taking a few steps in that direction. The first one came up and stood by his side.

It wasn't the half dozen steps Khatire needed, but she might not get another chance. She gave Nefaria's hand a gentle squeeze. Tuamutef had abandoned her, but Nefaria was with her still. The farther she went, the more that mattered to her. Steadying herself with a quiet breath, she embraced the crazed light bouncing off the quartz, controlling and reflecting it to create an illusion of nothingness. With soft, measured steps they moved toward the crystal archway. Nefaria's hand burned in hers, and Khatire dripped sweat beneath layers of clothing. The sweat on her forehead

collected into a single rivulet. She felt it reach her eyebrow and trickle, cooler and wet, down the bridge of her nose. Her body's liquid, refracting the light she oppressed, was its own tiny, unexpected prism.

Khatire blinked. The first guard turned, peering through the spot where they stood in disbelief. "What is *that*?" The other drew both daggers from his thighs. His kohl-rimmed eyes swept the torchlit corridor, then the crystal entryway, even the dark fog of the room beyond.

Khatire pulled Nefaria forward, faster now that she was losing control. "I'm not sure. A

shimmer—there it goes!" Khatire crushed Nefaria's hand in her fist, and the other woman stifled a small cry. But the sound was drowned out by the laughter of the second guard. "It's only the

empress's ghost. I told you Tabia walks these halls to see that no one marries His Splendor."

The women were through. Khatire yanked them to the right, out of sight along the dark-enveloped wall. She fell to the stone floor, bruising her knees. Her mind fluttered between Gift and

realsight, riotous color competing with comforting darkness while her stomach churned. Nefaria squatted beside her, reached for the criss-crossed ties at the neck of Khatire's woolen dress. She yanked them apart, spread the collar wide, and fanned cool air against her breasts. "We must keep moving," Nefaria whispered. "Or it will be our ghosts who haunt these halls." Khatire squeezed her chambermate's hand in thanks, then rose. Beyond the Bitter Chamber, the palace was guarded sparsely all the way to the outer walls. The emperor had learned centuries ago that his children were more malleable when they saw their mothers regularly, and Khatire had visited the nursery every day for three years as was her privilege. She traversed the familiar stone corridors with confidence, taking advantage of every shadow, every odd angle, and they reached the lower children's level without illusion. Khatire needed the rest. After the pass through the last arch, she was not sure how much, or how soon, she could rely on her Gift again. The older children caused more mischief, especially at night, and were more heavily guarded to protect others as well as the emperor's interest. But the nursing children were tended only by women too plain or powerless to be considered as concubines. So Khatire wasn't worried about entering the nursery. The hall finally ended in double doors, burnt mahogany and twice her height, carved with sharp, brutal lines making a vast spiderweb of green and black. She placed her hand on the door. Nefaria clutched her wrist. "I can't." Khatire spun on her angrily. "It's too late to have second thoughts now," she hissed. "I have no second thoughts," Nefaria whispered. She could not look at Khatire—no, she could not look at the door. She was one of the mothers who had never visited her own children in the nursery, not even once. "I... *can't*. Not there." Khatire thrust Nefaria into a shadowed corner. "Wait here." She turned to go, but Nefaria's hand darted out to clutch her wrist again. "What if you're caught?" she whispered low and urgently. "How do I escape the palace?" "We're going through the spinrag's bone-nest," Khatire said, turning away a second time. Nefaria hiccupped a laugh and grabbed Khatire once more. This time when Khatire spun on her, Nefaria's eyes glowed like two pale moons. "Oh gods, you're not joking..." Khatire jerked her arm free, then grasped the brass handles of the web-swathed doors and pulled them open. No, she wasn't joking. The spinrag's lair was the only way out where they wouldn't be seen or caught. But first she had to rescue Anut-ka. Within the receiving room, a marble likeness of the emperor's face glowered at her from atop its spiraled pedestal. Tuamutef said it had been carved centuries ago, before the emperor marched his armies across the continent, before the gods had exiled him to this tiny demesne pinned between the desert and the sea. Even carved in marble, it made her knees weak and gave her the thought, for just a second, that she might scurry back to His Splendor's bed and beg another chance. He was like a drug, potent even when diluted. She wrenched her gaze from the statue, and passed through the beaded curtain that covered the nursery entrance. Though she parted the strands slowly, carefully, the beads clattered like a tiny avalanche of pebbles. Within the vast room, no one stirred at the noise. She tiptoed across the polished mahogany floor, around scattered sleeping pallets, where the tiny children slept like puppies. Three small boys cuddled together around a stuffed lion. Lhare's small daughter, the only blonde, lay in the embrace of an older sister, sucking noisily on her thumb. High, open windows cooled the air, so that many of them huddled under blankets. Khatire crept from bed to bed, face to face, searching the sleep-parted lips and sheet-clenched fists for something familiar. There! Dark, arched brows and long black lashes—the eyes that Anut-ka inherited from his father. Khatire reached out to grab the child, who twitched with dreaming, and froze. It was a girl, almost four. Khatire's hand went to her throat. They were all brothers and sisters, all bearing mark of their father's features. A lump, hard and stinging, grew in Khatire's chest. There were so many! She could only save one. Stepping quietly around the room a second time, she found him at last, cozied into a corner where sandstone wall met mahogany paneling, arms wrapped around a sheepskin. She brushed his plump cheek with her fingertip. "Mama?" he murmured, reaching for her. "Shhh." He always knew her, even in the dark. He hugged her neck, snuggling his head against her shoulder until he found the right spot to go back to sleep. She could carry him out like this. It might work. Until they reached the spinrag. She rocked her hips back and forth to sooth him, while reaching for the vial of poison in her bag. A taste, no more, would keep him

sleeping. The cork popped free under her thumb. She hesitated, then dabbed it on her finger, which instantly went numb. Hand shaking, she wiped her fingers on his lip. He scrunched his face, rolled his head away from her.

“Shh, one little lick, Mama’s medicine,” she murmured. Unsure that he’d swallowed any, she reached into her pocket and tipped the bottle one-handed onto her finger again. She time she put her finger in his mouth and smeared it on his tongue.

He began to choke, near to crying, but she rocked him and stroked his hair to settle him. One of the children was sitting up in her sheets, watching them. Khatire kept her back to the girl and walked toward the beaded curtain, hurrying away before the child called out for their nurse sleeping in the next room.

She found Nefaria, backed into the corner where she left her. She jumped when she saw Khatire and her son, trying to retreat further into the shadows.

“We must go,” Khatire whispered, walking past. “Khatire, I—” She choked off a sob. Khatire stopped, hugging Anut-ka protectively.

“I’m so sorry.” “What did you do?” “I was afraid, I’ve been so afraid. Ankha found the dead vaim, I had to tell her something—” “Ankha was *here*?” Anut-Ka squirmed, and she realized her grip on him had tensed. She relaxed her hold, but kept her other hand tight on the dagger.

“No, no. I mindspoke to her. It’s my Gift. I told her you came back to the room, that you ran to hide in the servants’ quarters. Oh, gods, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” Khatire’s mind reeled. The servants’ wing lay at the opposite end of the palace, nearer the public walls and not the spinrag’s nest. Nefaria had lied to buy them time, so why was she apologizing?

She was apologizing because she had been Ankha’s spy all along. Ankha let Nefaria have a seat near the throne because she hid from the emperor and rarely tried to bed him anymore. Ankha had assigned them as chambermates when the emperor began to favor Khatire, after her son was born, just so Nefaria could spy on her. Nefaria had guessed the power of Khatire’s Gift and warned Ankha.

Nefaria held up the hem of her dress, her hands shaking as much as her voice. “I sewed things into my nightgown, I stole from Tuamutef. I want, I want to go home, Khatire, I want to escape. Please. I lied to Ankha—”

Khatire let go of the dagger and shifted Anut-ka’s weight to her other hip. He had grown heavy with the drug, unable to hold onto her. She turned and hurried down the hall. “Come if you want.” “Gods, thank you—”

“Don’t you dare speak to me.” ? ? ? If the guards were rushing to search the servants’ quarters they might have only minutes left to escape. Khatire tried to still her heart and mind to prepare for the spinrag. She had only approached it once before, when Ankha had thrown a slave girl to the creature and made all the concubines watch. The spinrag, already glutted and drowsy, had stung the girl then crawled off to sleep in its hole among the cliff-bottom rocks. Khatire, wrapped in shadows, the taste of vomit in her throat, had crept down and stolen poison from the swollen sting-lump on the dead girl’s body, to use on herself if she couldn’t bear to continue. Then, within days, she’d discovered she was pregnant, and her life had changed.

Anut-ka sagged in Khatire’s arm, too heavy to carry much longer. She grabbed Nefaria by the elbow and propelled her through the kitchens, weaving through chopping blocks and stone ovens, past an enormous spit of thick poles over greasy sand. Beyond the spit lay a trap door.

“We slide down the trash chute,” Khatire whispered, heaving on the metal ring. “You go first. Now, listen close!” Nefaria nodded, her eyes red, full of tears and uncertainty.

“When you land, don’t move. The spinrag will see you come, but she strikes at movement. If you remain still, she’ll wait for you to move again.” “How will we get past her?”

“Anut-Ka and I will slide down after, and I’ll create a flash to blind her. You must keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them. That will give me time to form the illusion we need to pass.”

The trap door lay open. Cooler air hit their cheeks, briny and damp and tinged with rotting vegetables. Nefaria sat on the edge, swung her legs into the hole. “Khatire, are you sure—”

“Remember, don’t move,” Khatire said, and shoved her through with a slippered foot. Nefaria’s gasp faded as the silk swaddling whisked her through the chute.

Khatire shifted Anut-ka’s body again as she sat on the edge of the chute. A drool stain soaked the shoulder of her dress. His face was slack, but his eyelids fluttered when she tickled his cheek. Gods, she hoped she had guessed the dose right. She had tested it only on herself, only once.

*Cerastes, spare my son, please.* She had no candle to offer as she prayed, so she formed a flickering light in the air in front of her, hoping the goddess would forgive her for

also using it to prepare her defense against the spinrag. A shriek clawed at her heart from far below, high and terrified. The light failed. Then pain burst across her temples; Nefaria was mindscreeaming. Khatire reeled, falling into the chute, trying to clutch Anut-ka to her chest. Her head bounced against the fungus-lined wall, her leg twisted under her, and Anut-ka slipped from her hands. She tried to pull him back in, grasping frantically for her Gift at the same time. She fell into open air and slammed into soggy, putrid garbage. Anut-ka tumbled from her hands and rolled down the compost heap. The spinrag crouched over Nefaria—a shining black carapace, barnacle-covered, with twitching pinchers. It lunged at Anut-ka's rolling body. Khatire screamed light; her voice, her terror, and her Gift as one. She lurched forward, stealing every particle of light from every star in the sky and exploding it like a shipful of fireworks. She blinded herself, bleaching the landscape before her eyes to layers of white and stained white, all of it a blur. The spinrag, only a pale gray now, clattered away, scattering rocks and bones in its rush to escape. Khatire fumbled on her hands and knees until she reached Anut-ka and scooped him to her chest. "Shh," she whispered comfort, rocking his silent body against her chest. "Shh." The spinrag lived at the ocean's edge, hunting the vermin that picked among the garbage. She only had to make her way past the compost dumps, up the slope to sheltered places among the rocks where she could rest until her sight returned. From there, she could find a way out of the valley, past the boundaries of the emperor's prison-demesne. Khatire staggered to her feet, took a few steps with Anut-ka. Panting, she glanced over her shoulder, prepared for the spinrag's next attack, but it was like looking at the world through a thick veil. A stone tumbled behind her—she clutched Anut-ka to her chest and nearly screamed. But no movement followed her. Her feet left the layers of garbage and rot, and she began to climb up the rocks. She slipped, banged a knee, held Anut-ka with one arm, tore her fingers on the stones, always climbing, until she reached a little ledge where they both spilled flat. She lifted him and carried him between a narrow crack of stone to a wider ledge. *Where are you?* Khatire kicked herself upright, back to stone. *Khatire?* Nefaria was mind-calling her. The spinrag's sting must have only grazed her. Maybe the stinger got stuck in all the layers of cloth, spilling its poison in the silk instead of flesh. *Help!* If Nefaria panicked, if she mind-called Ankha for aid, she would bring all the guards down on them at once, before they could escape. "I'm coming," she whispered. *Nefaria, wait for me, I'm coming.* She rolled Anut-ka over to the wall. His body was nothing but dead weight, and she could feel no breath stirring in him. She feared she had given him too much poison, but she couldn't stay to fix that now. She wrenched the dagger from her pocket, and, closing her mind to realsight, tried to see only with her Gift. From her vantage point, she stared down across the wet mounds of garbage at the spinrag's hiding place, a lightless hole, black against the glistening mounds of rotting vegetables and slime-covered stone around it. The huge pincers emerged out of the darkness first, tapping the ground as they came, covered with barnacles that made them swirls of rough light. The body came forward in a rush, its stilt-legs carrying it with astonishing speed. The tail curved over the body, bouncing like a brawler looking to land a punch. Near the barbed tip of the tail bobbed a venom sac the size of a human skull. *Help me!* "Don't move." Khatire scrambled down the rocky slope, sliding to the bottom. Cautiously, she inched toward Nefaria. Behind the spinrag's pinchers, on either side of its knobby head, were thousands of tiny eyes. Drawing on her Gift, Khatire formed a silhouette against the ragged wall. She forced the shadow to scamper, like a frightened rat, into one of the many branching corridors away from Nefaria. The spinrag clicked its sideways jaws opened and shut as it stepped toward the false shadow, feet clicking *tat, tat, tat*. It did not go far enough. Khatire flicked a group of light particles against the wall. The tail lashed so hard it nearly pulled the spinrag over when it failed to connect. Poison shot out of the tip, making a shiny wet splash against the rocks. Khatire threw the light again, and the spinrag jumped at it, slashing with its pinchers. Wrapped in shadow, Khatire ran to Nefaria's side. "I'm here," she whispered. "I can't feel half my body," Nefaria pleaded. "My left side is numb. I didn't see it coming. I think I can walk, if you help—" "Shh, lie still," Khatire said, kneeling beside her friend. The knife was hidden at her side. One sudden slash, just like she had done to the vaim, and Nefaria would be no more danger to them. She deserved it, deserved

it for betraying Khatire's trust, for revealing her secret, for putting her life and her son's life in danger. She was a bad person, a bad mother who ignored her own daughters. "Can you make it quick?"

Nefaria whispered, hiding her eyes in the crook of her arm. "I don't want the spinrag to take me."

Her pale neck lay exposed, bright as desert sand in moonlight to Khatire's Gift. The blue veins pulsed under the skin. Khatire's fist tightened on the dagger. The spinrag's legs came toward them, *tat-tat-tat*. She threw another ghost of light and shadow across its path, but this time it did not jump. The creature had learned.

Khatire dropped the dagger into her pocket. Her heart pounded, and her hands sweated. Nothing stood between them and the spinrag. Extending the shadow over Nefaria, she reached under her and helped her to her feet. Nefaria's head hung to one side, her left eyelid drooping, lips slack. One leg dragged behind her, toes kicking for purchase, but the other seemed steady enough. Her weight did not feel that much heavier than Anut-ka.

The spinrag lunged at the spot where Nefaria had lain, jabbing at the ground with its pincers. The head came up and swiveled from side to side. The tail flexed and tensed, coiled, ready to strike. Khatire crafted another illusion, cat-like and darting, on the other side of the refuse pile.

The spinrag took a few steps in its direction. *Tat, tat, tat*. Then it stopped and cocked its head again. Khatire tried once more—a tiny lightburst along the far wall that made the stones sparkle. The spinrag didn't move.

They were nearly to the wall, to the steep climb and the narrow squeeze between the rocks. The spinrag swiveled its head from side to side again. Khatire dragged Nefaria up the slope, pulling her toward what she hoped was the safety of the ledge. Nefaria helped, clutching with her one good hand, balancing their climb with her good leg. Her dragging leg dislodged a small rain of stone. The spinrag crossed the distance in less than a blink, its huge tail smashing into the rocks where their feet had just been. Nefaria flinched, nearly slipping away, dragging both of them down the slope.

Khatire panicked. She exploded light so hot, so dazzling, that pain seared her eyesockets. Nefaria whimpered, flinching again, shielding her face. Khatire gritted her teeth and yanked Nefaria's body up the ragged rock as the spinrag's tail slapped the stones again, splashing hot venom across her bare ankles. She blasted ball after ball of light, on one side and the other. The spinrag skittered upslope through the lightbursts, dislodging splatters of stone. Its pinchers smashed within inches of Khatire's face. Its tail lashed all around them.

And then they tumbled onto the ledge. Nefaria, sobbing, dragged herself with one arm to safety through the crevice in the stone. Khatire fell on her back, nearly spent, nearly blind. A vague shadow reared over the lip of the rocks. Khatire shaped a thousand darts of light and flung them at the spinrag's head in a focused blaze as bright as the midday sun. The creature jerked back so suddenly it tilted off-balance, and tumbled head over tail down the slope, bringing a slide of rock crashing around it.

Or so Khatire guessed from listening. Her world was only black. She sat there in the dark for a long time, with no idea where the ledge was, where the crevice was, or where she could find her son's still-poisoned body. Even when she heard Nefaria stir, cloth whisking stone, she sat, trying again and again to make light blossom, even a spark. But she could see nothing. Tears wracked her body until she heard the wounded limp of Nefaria's footsteps and felt a hand fall on her shoulder. "It's almost dawn," Nefaria whispered. "We have to go where they can't see us from the windows."

"I'm blind," Khatire answered. "I didn't call Ankha," she said. "She doesn't know where we are."

"I don't care." "You must live," she said urgently. Khatire laughed. "Must I?"

"Anut-ka stirs." What could she do for him, blind and helpless? Then she heard his voice, muffled, confused, and her heart leapt toward it. She staggered to her feet, nearly falling over.

"This way," Nefaria said, lifting Khatire's hand to her shoulder. Together they felt their way through the rocks. Anut-ka's mumble resolved into *mama*. "Shh, I'm here," Khatire whispered. Nefaria led her to his side, and he climbed into her arms even as she was kneeling, his weight tipping her over against the rocks. She clutched him tight, feeling his eyelashes brush her cheeks, his hair between her fingers, and she thought how she would never see his face. She began to weep again. "Mama, what's wrong?" he murmured. His breath was sour, as if he had vomited.

"Nothing's wrong," she said, almost laughed as the tears flowed even stronger. The poison was out of his system. She held his head in her hands and kissed his face until he pulled away. "It's going to be fine." "We found a

staircase,” he said, tugging at her hand. “It’s old,” Nefaria said at her side, startling her. “Made by workmen maybe, centuries ago. It leads over the ridge and out of the valley to the desert.” Which was the way they must go to escape. Khatire rose, wiping the tears from her eyes, and listened. The waves pounded the rocks on the other side of the palace, and the air was filled with salt. Somewhere up above them was the Bridge of Broken Wings, and beyond that the emperor’s spire and his plan to find the Paha Vaim and escape his exile. If she had survived the intrigue, and Anut-ka had become the heir, she would have lived the rest of her days in a splendor known only to emperors and gods. Now, she would be a blind beggar woman with a useless Gift and a son to raise, both of them living in an exile of their own making. “Mama, look at it shine,” Anut-ka said, tugging at her hand again, insistently. “It’s the wet rock, lit up by the dawn,” whispered Nefaria. “Is that it, mama?” Anut-ka asked. “Is that the Crystal Stair?” “Yes, it is,” Khatire said. She squeezed Anut-ka’s chubby little fist and held tight to Nefaria. “Let’s climb it together.”

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