



The Stepsister Scheme (Preview)

by Jim C. Hines



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The Stepsister Scheme

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Chapter 1

Danielle Whiteshore, formerly Danielle de Glas, would never be a proper princess. Not if the title required her to actually remember so many trifling details. She hadn't even learned the proper forms of address for human politicians, and now her tutor expected her to memorize *The Mortal's Guide to Faerie Courtesy: Navigating the Eightfold Path of Fey Politics* by the end of the week?

True, it was mostly her own fault. After her wedding, the king's steward had presented her with a trunk full of scrolls and books, "To study during your tour of Lorindar."

For three months that trunk had gathered dust while she and Prince Armand traveled the kingdom. She had tried to study, but there was so much to see. The old Coastal Highway to Colwich, the ocean to one side and snow-painted oaks on the other. The bridge to Emrildale, built centuries ago by dwarves without mortar of any sort. Only the weight of the intercut stones held the great arches aloft.

With Armand's help, Danielle had learned enough to avoid embarrassing herself as she was introduced to various lords and ladies. She still couldn't remember the difference between a Viscount and a Baron, but so long as her mistakes were minor, nobody dared to complain.

As for the nights . . . her cheeks grew warm. Suffice it to say, she had spent very little time studying *books*. The extra three days they had spent snowed in at South Haven had been particularly educational.

Still smiling at the memory, Danielle picked up another book from the bedside table. She opened to a random page and read:

*Indulge not overmuch
in wine or beer.
Pick not thy nose,
scratch not thy rear,
and all shall say
"A lady sits here."*

Danielle slammed the book shut and tossed it after the first. Much more of this, and she would be ready to go back to cleaning floors and cooking meals for her stepsisters.

She stood and rubbed her eyes. The polished black and white tiles were cool beneath her feet. The breeze from the open window carried the damp, salty taste of the ocean.

Her nose wrinkled. The breeze also brought the faint smell of manure from the gardens below.

Danielle walked to the window and knelt on a padded bench which had been embroidered with some royal crest or another. This one had a blue unicorn and a green bird that looked like a bloated chicken.

She pushed open the window, running her fingers over the rippled panes of glass. Tiny specks marred the glass: iron filings scattered into the mix when the panes were first formed. Pixie glass was supposed to protect a room from fairy magic, but in truth, iron only affected the weakest of curses. Still, enough people wanted such protection to keep Danielle's father in business for a good many years.

She smiled, remembering one of her father's last pieces, a window he had done for Duke Rokan of Little Hill. Mere filings sprinkled like pepper in the glass weren't enough for Rokan. For two weeks Danielle's father had worked to align dozens of tiny iron crosses, each one spaced evenly over the glass. A second layer of glass was then baked over the first.

Danielle had been only eight years old, but she remembered the finished window so clearly she could almost reach out and touch it. Not a single bubble or ripple had marred the glass. At a casual glance, the crosses appeared to float in mid-air within the frame.

A loud cooing sound made her smile. She leaned out, twisting her head to see several pigeons and one old dove perched on the green copper gutters which ran the length of Whiteshore Castle. The dove fluttered down to land on the sill beside her arm.

Danielle laughed. "I'm sorry, I've nothing to give you. You've already feasted on leftover muffins, cookies, and that bit of jam sandwich I smuggled up yesterday. If I feed you any more, you'll be too fat to fly."

The dove opened his mouth and cooed again, clearly unconcerned by such eventualities.

"Your highness?"

Danielle jumped, and the dove fluttered his wings in annoyance.

A serving woman stood in the doorway, a wooden tray in one hand. A trencher of bread sat in the middle, filled with glazed cherries and strawberries. A bronze cup stood beside it.

"Good morning, Talia."

The morning sun shone on her brown skin. Her voice was clear and smooth, almost musical. Only the slightest accent, an emphasis on the longer vowel sounds, distinguished her words from a native Islander. Danielle guessed her to be from the Arathean Deserts to the south, but Talia had never responded to Danielle's overtures.

Danielle still couldn't remember half of the nobles who visited each day, but she knew the names of every servant in the palace. Some were uncomfortable with the princess' familiarity, while others had started to relax in her presence.

Talia fit neither category. Though she appeared only a little older than Danielle's eighteen years of age, something in her bearing made Danielle feel like a child. She bowed her head slightly, every inch the proper servant, but her dark eyes met Danielle's without flinching. "I thought you might appreciate a snack."

On the windowsill, the dove cooed and hopped closer. Danielle glared in mock-annoyance. "Did you arrange this?"

"Highness?" Talia was staring at the dove, clearly skeptical of a princess who chatted with the birds.

"Thank you for the food," said Danielle. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

Talia nodded and brought the tray around the bed. With her free hand, she stacked Danielle's books to one side of the bedside table, then set down the tray, all so smoothly the wine in the cup barely even rippled.

The movement pulled back Talia's sleeves, revealing pale scars across her right forearm. Talia noticed Danielle's gaze, but didn't bother to adjust her shirt. Instead, she moved to the bed, straightening the covers and returning *The Mortal's Guide to Faerie Courtesy* to the stack on the table.

"Don't worry about that," Danielle said. "I can--"

"You are princess of Lorindar, your highness," said Talia. "Not some ash-covered slave girl from the city."

Danielle flushed and turned away. Everyone in the palace knew of her past, though nobody would speak of it to her face. Within days of the winter ball, rumors had spread through the city, growing wilder with every retelling: she had snuck from her house to attend the ball--no, she had stolen a carriage--no, she had ridden within an enchanted pumpkin, drawn by giant mice!

Danielle had nearly choked when she heard that last variant.

She grabbed the bread and tore off a bit of crust, which she tossed to the window. The dove fluttered to catch it before it hit the ground. Bread dangling from his beak, the dove flew up to perch upon a tapestry to the left of the window. Crumbs fell past the old weaving, a faded depiction of the Midsummer War. The tiny stitching showed fairies and their enchanted servants standing at the edge of a great crevasse as armored knights and human wizards drove them back.

An old winestain made a skirmish between human cavalry and a pair of

griffons appear even bloodier. Danielle ran a finger over the stain. White wine should bleach out the red, and would be far less noticeable. She turned to ask for a bottle of white wine, then bit her lip. Talia was right. She was no longer a servant. But old habits were hard to break.

"The birds, you train them?" asked Talia.

"Not exactly." Danielle grabbed another piece of bread for the dove, wondering how she could explain without convincing yet another servant that their new princess was mad. This was the first time Talia had spoken to her, beyond the requirements of her duties. "You usually tend to the queen."

A brief nod, as Talia straightened the candleholders mounted to either side of the window. Each was handcarved oak, shaped to resemble a dragon. The dragon's tail held the candles, while a mirror clutched in its claws reflected the light back into the room.

"Do you have family here at the palace?" Danielle asked, trying again.

"No."

Silence stretched between them, until a shout from the hallway made Danielle jump.

"I wish to see my stepsister at once!"

Danielle's throat tightened as Charlotte barged through the door, escorted by two guardsmen. It was almost four months since the wedding, and the sight of her elder stepsister was still almost enough to make her bow her head. Almost.

"You can go," Danielle said to the guards.

They hesitated, then bowed and backed away.

"Are you sure, highness?" Talia asked.

"She's still my sister." Danielle forced herself to meet Charlotte's angry glare. Small, mostly-healed scabs marred the beautiful porcelain of her cheeks. Charlotte was taller than Danielle, her limbs graceful and slender. She wore a heavy blue cloak with gold trim, which accented her brown curls. Ribbons of silver and gold were braided through her hair.

Charlotte's neck muscles tightened as she studied Danielle in turn, taking in the emerald gown, the silver comb in her hair, the simple ruby bracelet one of her ladies-in-waiting had insisted she wear, saying it highlighted her eyes. Danielle fought to keep from fidgeting. She was still uncomfortable with the luxury of palace life, but she wasn't about to let Charlotte see that discomfort.

This wasn't the first time Charlotte had visited the palace, using her relationship with the princess to try to ingratiate herself to various nobles. She had never before come to Danielle's chambers, though.

The months had been unkind to Danielle's stepsister. Charlotte's mother had groomed her for a life of luxury, leaving her woefully unprepared to run the household that once belonged to Danielle's father. Charlotte's face seemed paler than Danielle remembered, and her eyes were shadowed and bloodshot.

Talia stepped around the bed, putting herself between Danielle and Charlotte. "Would the lady like something to eat or drink?" she asked.

"I'm not here to dine," Charlotte snapped. "I'm here to--" Her voice rose to a squeak as she spotted the dove perched on the tapestry. She backed away until she bumped the door, her wide eyes never leaving the bird. "Get that foul beast from my sight at once!"

The dove puffed out his feathers and flapped his wings, dropping the remainder of the crust to the floor. Charlotte screamed. She raised her hands to protect her face, just as she had done at Danielle's wedding.

Danielle flinched at the memory. She remembered the hateful glares of her stepsisters, and the cool, calculating look in her stepmother's eyes as she watched Danielle and her new husband pass through the crowd of well-wishers. She had tightened her fingers on Armand's arm, telling herself she would not let them ruin this day. This was her day. Hers and Armand's. Finally, she was *free*.

Despite everything, her eyes had begun to tear. It should have been her mother standing there, not her step-mother. Her father, not Charlotte and Stacia.

"It will never last," her step-mother had said, loud enough for Danielle to hear. "As if a prince could be happy with such a common girl."

Charlotte and Stacia had laughed, as did a few others in the crowd. The prince's arm tensed. But before he could speak, a group of doves swooped down, wings fluttering as they clawed and pecked at Danielle's step-mother. Charlotte and Stacia screamed. Stacia tried to club the birds with her hands, but her efforts only shifted the birds' attack to Stacia and Charlotte. Only when Danielle begged the birds to stop did they finally fly away, leaving her step-mother blind and bloodied.

Given the events of that day, Danielle could understand Charlotte's reaction. She turned to address the dove. "Go," she said. "I'll save some food for you and your friends."

Obediently, the dove hopped from the tapestry and swooped out the window. Charlotte shoved past Danielle, pulling the window shut so hard one of the panes cracked. Her hands shook as she fastened the latch.

"He wouldn't have hurt you," Danielle said.

Charlotte whirled. Pointing to the scabs on her face, she said, "Your filthy birds disfigured me for life. They murdered my mother. They would have killed me as well, if we hadn't fought them off."

"They didn't--"

"Shut up." Charlotte pulled her cloak tighter, like a child trying to protect herself from the cold. "They blinded her. For seven days she lay in bed as the wounds spread through her blood." She laughed, a high-pitched sound that bordered on madness. "Releasing doves at a wedding is supposed to be a sign of prosperity. Tell me, princess, what does it portend when the doves try to *eat the*

guests?"

"They were confused and scared," Danielle said.

"They swarmed over us." Charlotte swiped the winecup Talia had brought and drained it in one motion. "Nobody else received so much as a scratch."

Danielle shook her head. She was certain she hadn't ordered the birds to attack her stepmother and stepsisters. Not once in all the years since her father's death had she struck back at her tormenters. Whatever fluke had caused the birds to attack, Danielle was positive she hadn't done it.

Almost positive.

Charlotte tossed the cup to the floor and glared at Talia. "Haven't you better things to do? I wish to speak to my stepsister about my inheritance, and I'll not have a servant lurking about, gathering bits of gossip like a dog snatching scraps from her master's table."

Charlotte used to speak to Danielle in that same, dismissive tone. But Danielle had never met that disdainful glare with such a cold, tight smile. Talia stooped to retrieve the cup, using the hem of her apron to blot up the spilled wine. Her eyes never left Charlotte's face.

"I would be happy to escort you to the Chancellor's office," Talia said.

"Father Isaac is highly knowledgeable about such matters, and he--"

"I see," Charlotte said. "Now that you've married into royalty, you hope to use your newfound friends to bully my sister and I, to rob us of everything we have left."

"That's absurd," said Danielle, already weary. "Thank you, Talia. I'll ring if we need anything further."

Talia hesitated, then turned to go.

The instant the door closed, Charlotte whirled on Danielle. "You murdered my mother, *your highness*." She still moved with a faint limp, courtesy of that night when Prince Armand had arrived at the house bearing Danielle's lost slipper.

Danielle took a deep breath. "Is that why you've come? To hurl your grief and anger at my feet like the soiled linens you used to fling on my floor? I'm sorry about your mother, Charlotte. I asked the king and queen to provide healers, but--"

"My sister and I want *nothing* from you," said Charlotte, stepping so close that spit sprayed Danielle's face. From the smell, Charlotte had imbibed far more than a single cup of wine today. "Unless you've the power to raise the dead?"

Danielle took a discreet step back. "Then why are you here? Your mother left everything to you and Stacia. My father's home, my mother's garden, all of it belongs to you now. What more do you want from me?"

Charlotte smiled. Her free hand unfastened the bronze clasp at her neck, and her cloak slid to the floor. Beneath, Charlotte wore peasant's garb: a loose

shirt of white linen, and a rough brown skirt. Normally, strings of gold or jewels would have adorned her long neck. Today she wore only a leather necklace threaded through a smooth blue stone. A long hunting knife hung from a rope belt. Her feet were bare, aside from a soiled bandage on her right foot.

Charlotte's own mother had cut away part of her heel in a deranged attempt to fit Charlotte's foot to Danielle's discarded slipper.

"I'm here to do what my mother should have done," Charlotte whispered. Eyes wide, she yanked the knife from its sheath.

Danielle backed toward the wall. The knife alone wasn't enough to frighten her. She couldn't count the number of times Charlotte had threatened to throw Danielle into the fireplace, or bury her in the garden, or drag her down to the canals and drown her like an unwanted kitten. But those clothes . . . Charlotte would have sooner died than be seen in such poor fashion. She had always been her mother's fancy doll, garbed in the most expensive dresses and jewelry, even as Danielle shivered in ash-stained rags.

"You like it?" Charlotte asked, stroking her necklace. She waved a hand at the door. The iron bolt slid into place.

"How did you do that?" Danielle asked.

The blade caught the sunlight as Charlotte approached. "You think you're the only one with secrets? I know all about you, little Cinderwench. How your dead mother enchanted the prince, making him choose you over me. How she showered you with silver and gold for the ball. How she helped you scar my face and murder my mother."

Danielle reached the bedside table. Never taking her eyes from Charlotte, she reached down until her fingers brushed the edge of the tray Talia had left.

"I tried to help you and Stacia," Danielle said. "Armand wanted you imprisoned for your deceptions. I'm the one who urged mercy. I allowed your mother's will to stand uncontested, rather than fighting you for my father's home. I gave you the chance to start your own lives."

"The life I wanted, the life I was promised, is the one you took from me," Charlotte said. "You should thank me, *princess*. Soon you'll be with your beloved mother."

"At least I'll be safe from yours," Danielle snapped.

Charlotte's eyes widened.

Danielle swung the tray with both hands, scattering the remnants of her meal across the room. As a weapon, the wooden platter was slow and awkward. Charlotte twisted, catching the blow on her left shoulder. She grabbed the other side of the tray, then sliced her knife at Danielle's arm.

Danielle released the tray. The knife missed, and Charlotte stumbled back. She threw the tray to the floor and advanced again.

"Help me, friends," Danielle whispered. She picked up *The Tome of*

Noble Manners and held it in front of her body. It was no shield, but given the wordiness of the author, the book should be able to stop a knife.

Charlotte lunged. Danielle moved the book, catching the knife near the corner. The steel barely penetrated the heavy cover, but the force behind the blow was enough to knock Danielle into the desk. Other books clattered to the floor. The inkwell fell and shattered.

Perhaps it was madness, but as the book was torn from Danielle's hand, her only thought was how difficult it would be to clean the ink from the tile grout.

The bedroom door rattled in its frame, but there was no way to unlock the bolt from the outside.

Charlotte reached for Danielle's throat, and the window exploded inward. Shards of glass tinkled to the floor as the old dove led a pair of pigeons into the room. Charlotte screamed and spun, slashing wildly.

Danielle ripped one of the pillows from the bed and flung it over Charlotte's arm, tangling the knife. When Charlotte turned, Danielle punched her in the nose. Charlotte stumbled back. Danielle grabbed the stool and raised it overhead.

Before Danielle could strike, Charlotte touched her necklace and shouted, "No!"

The stool shattered. Charred wood and splinters rained down around Danielle. Charlotte blinked, looking almost as shocked as Danielle felt.

A pigeon caught Charlotte's hair in his feet and tugged. Another pecked her ear. She waved the knife about so frantically she almost cut her own face, but it was enough to drive the birds back.

Danielle leapt for the bed, but her foot slipped on the books, and she fell hard. She rolled away from Charlotte, broken glass and wood pricking at her back. One of the pigeons dove for Charlotte's face, but a lucky swing of the knife sent him tumbling against the bed, blood dripping from his wing.

"Drop the knife." Talia's voice was cool and firm, more commanding than any servant. She stood in the doorway, holding one of the oversized crossbows normally carried by the palace guards. Made of polished black wood with gleaming brass trim, it should have been more than enough to compel obedience. Danielle had no idea how Talia had gotten through the door, but her timing was divine.

"Wait," Charlotte cried.

"No." Talia pulled the trigger. A steel-tipped bolt buzzed through the air.

At the same time, the dove lurched toward Charlotte, as if an invisible hand had struck him from the side. The bolt tore into the dove's chest. He slammed into Charlotte, leaving a bloody smear on her shirt, then dropped to the ground. Tiny legs twitched slowly.

Talia didn't hesitate. She threw the crossbow at Charlotte's face,

bloodying her nose and knocking her into the wall. Talia slipped a toe under the tray Danielle had thrown. A flick of her foot brought the edge of the tray into her hand. Talia spun, moving like a dancer as she hurled the tray into Charlotte's forearm. Charlotte's knife clattered away.

Talia strode across the room. "Stay down, princess."

Charlotte backed toward the broken window. She closed her eyes, and her lips moved as if in prayer. An instant later, the window frame cracked and fell away, taking the remains of the glass.

Talia leapt, but Charlotte was faster, pulling herself through the opening even as Talia's fingers brushed her ankle.

"Damn." Talia drew back from the window. "She didn't even sprain an ankle."

Danielle turned to check on the dove, who lay in a pool of blood. One look was enough to tell her the bird was dead. The tip of the crossbow bolt protruded from the dove's back, propping him to one side. She brushed a finger over the soft white feathers of his head, blinking back tears.

One of the pigeons had also been injured. He dragged his wing along the floor as he approached. Danielle scooped him gently into her hands. "He's still bleeding."

Halfway to the door, Talia stopped to stare. "He's a pigeon."

"They saved my life."

Talia shook her head. "I saved your life. They distracted your stepsister long enough for me to get here."

Danielle looked at the open door. "How did you--"

"No time. Stay here with your birds, princess. The guards will be here very soon." She slammed the door behind her when she left.

Danielle fought to keep from shaking as she climbed to her feet and peered out the window. Far below, Charlotte sprinted across the courtyard. She had dropped three stories from Danielle's window, but she ran with only the slightest limp.

Danielle inspected the pigeon's wing. The bleeding didn't look too serious, but she still fought the urge to seek out the king's surgeon for help. Instead, she set him gently on the middle of the bed. For most of her life, her stepsisters and stepmother had kept her locked away. She refused to let Charlotte confine her now.

"Thank you, my friend," she whispered. "I'll be back as soon as I can." Wiping her face, she hurried out the door after Talia.

#

Beams of golden sunlight illuminated the corridor as Danielle raced toward the stairs. Startled guardsmen lurched out of her way. One called out to her, but she ignored him.

Up ahead, Talia had already disappeared down the staircase. Danielle grabbed the folds of her gown with her free hand and ran faster.

By the time she reached the courtyard, Danielle's heart was pounding in her chest and she had begun to sweat. Far ahead, Talia whirled, one hand slipping up her sleeve. Her expression changed to annoyance when she recognized Danielle.

"I told you to wait, princess," Talia said, in a tone nobody had dared use to Danielle's face since the wedding.

"She's my stepsister," said Danielle, still running. "And I won't have your death on my conscience. Go and tell the guards what's happened."

Talia ran alongside Danielle. "I sent the guards to watch *you*. Which they've obviously failed to do."

Neither woman slowed. Danielle could see Charlotte pulling herself up on to the roof of the chapel. How she had climbed the stone walls, Danielle had no idea. Probably the same way she had survived the drop from Danielle's bedchamber.

Talia pulled ahead of Danielle as she sprinted through the garden, stooping once or twice to snatch something from the soil and earning a curse from one of the gardeners. Danielle did her best to keep up.

The sun illuminated Charlotte's form as she climbed to the peak of the chapel roof. Arms outstretched for balance, Charlotte walked toward the steeple.

By now, several people had emerged from the chapel to point and stare. Two guardsmen rushed from the northwest tower.

At the top of the steeple, a wooden cross decorated with silver towered over the chapel. The inlaid metal still gleamed, despite being almost twenty years old. Charlotte stretched one hand toward the cross. Danielle wasn't sure what she hoped to accomplish. If she could pull herself up, she might be able to jump to the north wall of the castle, but the guards were already closing in. She would be trapped.

Talia drew back one arm and hurled a round, green object toward Charlotte. Danielle saw another in Talia's left hand, and recognized it as an unripe tomato. The first tomato caught Charlotte on the side of the head.

Charlotte's hand slipped from the cross. Her arms whirled as she tried to regain her balance. She started to fall, then leapt.

"Charlotte!" Danielle shouted.

Crenellated stonework rose to shoulder height on either side of the walkway atop the wall, making the jump even more difficult. Charlotte started to fall, and then it was as if the air itself gathered to lift her. Wind whipped her hair as she drew up her legs, landed neatly in one of the gaps between the stones. She hopped down onto the walkway and turned back and forth. To Danielle's eye, she appeared frightened.

"Easy there, girl," shouted one of the guards.

Charlotte turned away, staring out at the sea below.

Another guard approached from the northeast tower. "Nothing there but a long drop and a messy death on the rocks at the bottom of the cliff, lass."

Danielle reached Talia in time to hear her mutter, "Sounds good to me." Talia raised her second tomato.

"Wait." Raising her voice, Danielle called out, "Charlotte, they'll kill you if you try to fight."

Charlotte began to laugh. She wiped her face on her sleeve, then spread her arms. "Let them. It doesn't matter. Without your precious prince, you'll never be anything but a filthy little serving wench."

Danielle's skin tingled, the hair on her neck responding to the barely-concealed edge of gloating in Charlotte's voice. She glanced at Talia, who was watching Charlotte with the same intensity as a cat preparing to pounce.

"Order her taken alive," Talia whispered.

"What?" Danielle stared, confused.

"The guards won't take orders from a servant," Talia said through clenched teeth. "Do not let her escape."

"There's nowhere for her to. . . ." Danielle trailed off as she remembered Charlotte's leap from the window, and the way she had practically flown from the chapel roof to the top of the wall. She raised her voice. "Guards, I need that woman taken alive!"

One of the guards raised his crossbow while the others closed in. Charlotte smiled and fingered her necklace.

"Be careful," Danielle yelled. She knew that smile. "That stone around her neck, it's magical!"

Talia swore and threw her last tomato. It flew straight and true, catching Charlotte on the ear and knocking her to the far side of the wall. Charlotte shrieked in rage, then pointed toward the approaching guards.

The guard with the crossbow stumbled. His weapon twisted in his hands, coming around to point at Danielle.

A sharp blow to the back of the knees knocked Danielle down. A heartbeat later, Talia's foot slammed into Danielle's shoulder, flattening her against the earth. The crossbow bolt thumped into the ground where Danielle had stood. She looked up, barely able to see Charlotte as she climbed onto the outer edge of the wall. The guards ran toward her. One nearly grabbed her arm, and then Charlotte leapt away.

Danielle got to her feet and ran for the nearest stairway, a sickening feeling in her gut. She wanted to throw up, but she forced herself to keep going. Up through the tower, through the guard room, and out onto the wall.

Damp, salty wind made her stagger as she stepped onto the wall. The

guards crowded around the point where Charlotte had jumped, all save the one who had fired his crossbow at Danielle. He was still staring at his weapon, his bearded face white.

He jerked to attention when he saw Danielle. "Your highness, I . . ." He blinked, then flung the crossbow away like its touch burnt his hands. "I'm sorry, I didn't--"

"I know," said Danielle. She patted him on the arm as she hurried past.

One of the other guards moved to block her way. "You shouldn't be up here, your highness. A single misstep--"

Danielle kept walking. He stepped aside at the last moment, so close she could smell the sweat in his uniform and the sharp, metallic scent of polish from his helmet. She moved to the outer edge of the wall, to the gap where Charlotte had jumped. Resting her hands on the thick, white stones, Danielle leaned out to stare at the sea.

Far below, waves broke against the rocks at the base of the cliff. Clouds of mist transformed to glittering silver fog where they met the sun.

"Where is she?" Danielle asked.

"We don't know," said the nearest guard, a boy no older than Danielle herself, to judge from his smooth face. "When she fell, the mist. . . ."

"I saw it too," said another, rubbing his gray-stubbed chin. The single white plume on his helmet marked him as a sergeant. "The fog drew back, all but disappeared, and the water became still as ice. Then, for the life of me, it was like she shrank away to nothing."

"There was no splash," said a third guard.

"You two get down to those rocks and see if you can find any trace of her," said the sergeant. "I'm going to go report this to the captain." He gave Danielle a tight smile. "Don't worry, highness. We'll take care of this."

Danielle wiped her face and backed away, to the sergeant's clear relief. She doubted the guards would find anything. From the look on the sergeant's face, so did he.

Charlotte had escaped. She would never take her own life. She loved herself far too much.

"All right, enough gawking," snapped the sergeant. "One of you lot escort the princess back to her quarters."

"I can do that, sir," said Talia. Danielle hadn't even noticed her. "I know you'll want every man on the wall to help protect us in case that woman returns."

He nodded and turned away, staring down at the ocean below. Talia took Danielle's arm and tugged her back toward the tower. "Come, princess," she whispered. "We must talk."

Danielle allowed Talia to lead her from the wall. She felt dizzy, her mind numb as she tried to understand what had happened. Charlotte had tried to

murder her. And Armand. . . . "What did she mean about my husband?"

Talia's fingers tightened painfully. "Come," she said again.

As they hurried across the courtyard, Danielle glanced up at the iron cross and prayed for Armand.

Read more in **The Stepsister Scheme**, coming in January of 2009.
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