

Tool of the Mind

Based on the characters from Stepsister by Jennifer Donnelly

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Isabelle looked intently down at the table, maps sprawled this way and that. How could she have been so stupid? It was now her fault that the remaining troops of Volkmar had entered the castle grounds. It wouldn't be long until they were ready to strike. It surprised Isabelle that they had even made it this far. Most of what Volkmar left behind was weak and scattered.

They wanted revenge, to die for their cause. Why? Isabelle had no clue. It seemed futile.

"Where are they now?" she demanded.

"Approaching the south wall," one of her soldiers answered.

"How much time do we have?"

"Fifteen minutes at most." Isabelle ran her hands through her hair. The king and queen trusted her with their lives, she wasn't prepared to let them down.

"Send out word among the troops, prepare for battle," Isabelle said.

"Yes, ma'am," the soldier saluted before exiting the tent. Isabelle rolled up the maps and went to grab her sword.

"That wouldn't be the smartest idea." Isabelle spun around, her sword at the ready, only to find a woman with long, auburn hair, black lips, and emerald eyes. Tanaquill. "There are more of them than you anticipated and with your resources stretched thin..."

"I won't be able to defend the castle on my own," Isabelle sighed.

"Use your mind. A warrior's mind is their greatest tool," the fairy queen said.

"What am I able to do? You said it yourself, there are more of them than we thought," Isabelle looked desperately into Tanaquill's eyes, but the cold she found there made her break eye contact.

Tanaquill's shrill laugh caused rustling in the bushes outside and a flock of birds in the trees to rise and fly away. "My girl, I cannot just give you all the answers. Where would the fun be in that?"

"Then why have you come, your Grace?" Isabelle did her best to keep the growl out of her voice.

"To point out the missing pieces and maybe keep you around a little longer. You have been one of my favorites," Tanaquill snickered.

"With all due respect, your highness, I must join my men in the field." Isabelle went to exit the tent, but Tanaquill stepped in her way.

"Did you not hear my words, foolish girl? Use your mind. Never in there did I say use brute strength."

"My mind?"

"Must I repeat myself?" Isabelle stared at Tanaquill, confused.

Then, like she was smacked on the cheek, she realized what the fairy queen wanted. "Ambush them."

"You do have a brain somewhere in that skull," Tanaquill smiled almost evilly. "Well? Get going, you don't have all day." And just like she appeared, she was gone. Isabelle didn't have time to try to figure out how the fairy queen disappeared. She ran out to her men.

"The forest. We have to get to the forest," she announced.

“Grand Duchess?” one man asked.

“I miscalculated the enemy’s numbers. If we get to the forest, we can ambush them.”

“You heard her men! Grab your swords and fall in!” one of the colonels yelled. Isabelle led the men into the forest and stationed them behind trees. Flashbacks of the night she spied on Volkmar echoed in the back of her mind. She listened with silent intent as footfall became slowly audible, echoing through the dark forest. She had told her soldiers to wait for her mark to start the attack.

When the enemy was just past the tree closest to their camp, Isabelle struck, followed by the rest of the men. Their swords swung gracefully, yet swiftly, bringing about an end to the group that sought to dethrone the king and queen. As fast as the remaining troops of Volkmar’s army had appeared, they were defeated.

Isabelle stood proudly in the middle of the tree-lined battlefield, taking in the splendor of victory. What remained of the tyrant Volkmar was now gone. The kingdom could once again sleep in peace knowing the terror was over. That gave Isabelle a warm feeling inside. In a matter of months, Isabelle had gone from one of the most hated people in France to one of the most beloved.

“Salute the Grand Duchess, the hero of France!” the colonel called out. All the men stood at attention, saluting Isabelle. In the shadows of the trees, Isabelle swore she saw the silhouette of a woman, emerald eyes piercing through the darkness.