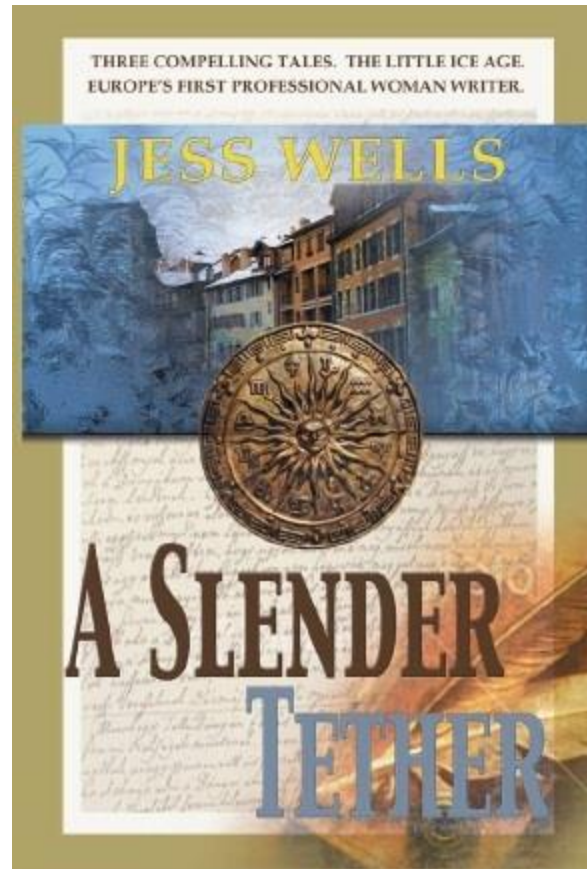




A Slender Tether

A novel by Jess Wells

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Part One: “The Raptor Among Bluebirds”

Paris, 1387

1

Gilles Malet stretched his hand across the table to comfort his friend, Tommaso de Pizan, who was sweaty with fever, pale as a fish, eyes ringed red from crying.

“Not a word to my wife and family,” Tommaso said to Gilles, as he reached into his tunic and tossed a piece of parchment onto the table between them.

The parchment was wrinkled as if it had been gripped in a fist; it was frayed and stained from the sweat of Tommaso’s fever. It displayed an astrological chart that Tommaso had just finished, and it showed a birth, an array of planets, and a death.

Gilles Malet read the parchment, then shuddered and slapped his hand on top of it as if to stop vapors from rising. The chart predicted that four days from now Tommaso de Pizan himself would die.

Gilles reached across the table and grabbed Tommaso by the upper arms, but both men were speechless.

Gilles couldn’t protest that Tommaso must be mistaken. Tommaso had been the court astrologer, an advisor to the late king Charles V, and a physician who had fallen from favor. Gilles couldn’t hope Tommaso was wrong and wish him to fail in the last prediction of a faltering career: it would cast doubt on the man’s abilities. But at the same time, Tommaso was Gilles’ closest friend. They were so close that after all these years of the same food and wine, surrounded by the same candles, working to the same schedule, Gilles imagined that he and Tommaso now even smelled the same, more so than any husband and wife.

Tommaso de Pizan cleared his throat, as if Malet’s own words were stuck in it. “I see no path for my family after I’m gone. There will be no money for them.” He slipped from Gilles’ grip and sat back, exhausted. The linen of his shirt was soaked through with sweat; his hair was limp on his shoulders.

The fact was that the plan he had made for his family was failing, and that was more shameful than his illness. It was particularly shameful in the presence of Gilles Malet, Chief Librarian to the court of the king. Twenty years, side by side, and it had always been difficult for Pizan to be the shorter, undecorated, hot-tempered man, the man who wasn't elegant, and wasn't French. Now the phlegm in his lungs seemed a final disgrace.

Gilles touched his arm. "No one is being paid, Tommaso. Except the tailor," he added with disgust. "And the vintner. Besides, you have able-bodied sons."

"Bodied. Able-bodied." Decadence ruled the court now, but it still took a quick mind to profit from court intrigue. "Already my boys live off the favors of unseen friends."

No, Tommaso thought—coughing into one hand while holding his side with the other—his sons would wind up pawns or stooges before his wife passed on. And it was all his blundering. He hadn't taught them well, hadn't sent them off to forge alliances or secure smart marriages. He had just kept his eyes on the stars, cocksure in his own ability to put food on the table. And how pathetic was that? How broken in so many ways? Men were the oxen of the world—that's the way it was supposed to be—but he'd proved unable to pull his weight. Good God, he could advise the king of France and still not have the wit to keep his own purse full.

"Even the library is wasting away," Gilles whispered and the two men looked down the long wooden table of the royal library with another shared grief.

The scriptorium and the library were too neat, too clean. It should be bustling with people, with stacks of parchment overflowing the tables, the air thick with the acrid smell of ink and chemicals, with mites and fibers dusting the air. There should be near-mayhem, with parts of

volumes spilling off tables onto makeshift pallets. Instead, it was tidy: all the bottles dusted, all the brushes clean, not a drib-drab of paint or ink anywhere. Malet had been watching his staff sit in maddening inactivity for more than a year. His only intellectual challenge had been in inventing things for them to do: inkwells to clean and parchments to sort.

De Pizan, out of favor and rarely called for service, spent his days with Gilles, two intellectuals in a frivolous court, trussed up and dressed for responsibilities, when they had as much to do as when they wore nightshirts.

Tommaso suddenly shivered against a chill. The fog outside the library windows was as thick as their quandary. Gilles couldn't recall ever having seen fog this dense in Paris, and the threatening, inexplicable weather seemed another affront. Sudden heat would bake the countryside and fry the crops, followed a day later by freezing rain that turned a parched road impassible. The orderly seasons had given way, as had so much else that was orderly, to cruel, undependable, zig-zagging weather. Gentle spring mornings reverted to bitter winter by evening; summer skies that should have been blue stayed gloomy for weeks. A protracted storm brought a wall of water surging up the coast in the Low Countries, wiping away entire villages and sweeping thousands out into the ocean, burying others under the rubble of their own homes; they said it had carved an inland sea. Erratic, inexplicable, fickle. There was nothing to count on.

"Gilles, God has given me healthy children, with everything necessary for their well-being, and then, in His wisdom, split up the gifts and switched them around so they reside where they don't belong. Separated one gift from the next so that not any one of my children has all they need to preserve the family. Why is that, Gilles?"

Tommaso covered his mouth with his hand, knowing it was blasphemy to question. But his daughter, Christine, had a mind so quick he didn't dare tell anyone; what was a woman like that to do? His wife and daughter were locked in combat as his wife tried to shape Christine into someone who might be acceptable at court. Of his twin sons, Paolo had his father's disregard for authority, but it had no lightness in it. The dark side of him courted trouble. Only Aghinolfo, the other twin, was spirited and joyful, but he had none of his father's intelligence, let alone the brilliance of his sister, and so was perceived as silly and jester-like.

Four days, Tommaso thought. Dust to dust wasn't the half of it. Worse was the worm-like feeling before you died, when you saw that that the struggle was all for naught, when you crumpled and grew putrid and still had to kiss your children goodbye. He didn't think he could bear to touch his wife tonight for the sting of it. Drink your last made its taste too sharp. His tongue would claw to remember it.

Gilles squared his shoulders, struggling not to match the tears that ran down Tommaso's face; it was a man's kindness to turn a friend away from emotion.

And he wanted to turn himself away, as well. When a man lost a woman, he's lost someone who has always lived in a mysterious land, who has been made of other parts and unknown liquids. A man assumed he would lose a woman and knew she wasn't really of his world. But when he lost a friend, a man whom he had worked with for years, it was different, Gilles thought, as the heat of Tommaso's fever radiated into Gilles' hands. When you lost a man you lost the part of you that had been complicit in his decisions. You faced final judgment on all the choices you had made together, all the times you could have turned his tide but didn't.

Tommaso was so many things that Gilles knew he himself was not: impetuous and expressive; Gilles had chosen the stricter path. He was taciturn and proper. Gilles towered over men, as strong and healthy as a warring knight but unscarred, an intellectual, a superior man of inferior station. He was laced up and polished, with a thick head of dark hair and a symmetrical nose, but women were not drawn to him: His propriety seemed to have squeezed all the sexuality out of his good looks. A part of Gilles had always hoped that Tommaso had made the better of life's choices.

Tommaso hadn't cultivated the land he had been given by the king: he hardly even visited it to verify the logging deal or the tenant. Instead, Tommaso had taken his family to the ocean on a whim, brought exotic meats into the library, and had given presents in the middle of last summer to Gilles and all the scribes, pretending it was the feast day of an Italian saint. The Duke d'Orleans had caught him dancing in the library and Tommaso frequently had to be reminded to lace down his sleeves and tie back his long black hair. His sons pulled pranks and bought musical instruments they didn't know how to play. There was word of at least one bastard child of Aghinolfo's son the other side of Paris, and for a year before Paolo had married, there was a new caper every week involving rapiers and women. Tommaso's breath often reeked of peppers and wine, and Gilles loved him for it, hoping there was a reward for the impetuosity that Gilles wouldn't choose for himself.

Now Gilles felt like a thief. He had drunk down his friend's stories, enlivened by the skirmishes and the bad music, while walking the safer path of self-denial. He had profited from Tommaso's excess. He should have loaned Tommaso more money. Perhaps he should have

intervened at the court so that Pizan would have been paid, or shipped him off to better doctors in the East. God help them. Four days. In their life together, Tommaso was the bright banner and Gilles the post it hung on. He was steady and predictable and Tommaso provided the spontaneity and entertainment. What was Gilles to say now: You've grown tattered because you're not a post? All he could think of was how barren the post would be without the riotous banner.

Tommaso struggled to put his mind on practical matters. "Gilles, you know Christine is inordinately fond of the library. Could you see fit to let her...visit...sometimes?"

The big oak door of the library creaked open and Gilles was glad he refused to let his staff oil it: its warning was appreciated. Etienne du Castel entered. Gilles retracted his hands and stiffened his shoulders. Tommaso pulled a cloth from his sleeve to wipe his face and secreted the parchment away.

Etienne, a secretary to the court and married to Tommaso's daughter Christine, looked crestfallen until he saw his elders at the table and then he hurriedly assumed a placid face. He crossed to the head of the table with dignity, bowed in obeisance, and set a thin leather binder in front of them.

Malet motioned for him to speak.

"As for the request that you begin a new piece of transcription, they...rejected it again..." Etienne began.

"Even the history of the Persians?" Tommaso was incredulous. He leaned toward Malet. "How are we to fight a people without knowledge of them?"

"They have asked for a project, however," the young man interjected weakly.

Malet raised his eyebrows. He knew it was wrong to keep sending Etienne to make manuscript requests in his stead, but he couldn't bear to do the presentations himself anymore. Assess the import of a volume that arrives; describe its importance to the king, and request that it be kept and copied for preservation and distribution to the dukes' libraries. Straightforward, yes, but Gilles couldn't tolerate the way the king's eyes glazed over during the descriptions as if he didn't even know how to read.

Admittedly, the king was only nineteen and so couldn't really be expected to be as wise as his father (God rest his soul) had been; but, frankly, he wasn't even as wise as his father had been at fourteen. And Gilles couldn't stomach the king's brothers, the dukes, who only asked if the volume came from a foreign crown, as if a volume possessed tactical advantage like a piece of land at a port. These days even the lesser courtiers thought they had license to pass off their ignorance as wit by calling out to him in the middle of his presentations. So he sent Etienne to make the presentations, instead. The young man had grace and obedience. And today, it would seem, success.

"Forward movement, Etienne. Nicely done. And the project is?"

Etienne, his long blond hair falling forward as he looked at the tips of his shoes, drew a breath and squared his shoulders. "To locate and translate a history of gold filigree, milord."

"Filigree!" Tommaso was incredulous.

Malet inhaled against his own anger but shot Tommaso a cautionary look. It wouldn't do to rail against the king in the library.

"From the Phoenicians to the current Celts," Etienne detailed.

Tommaso swept a bony arm toward the shelves. “The rats have at the place while we wait a task of merit...” he started, but then coughed as if his shoulders were collapsing.

Etienne stepped toward his father-in-law but Tommaso waved him away. He wiped his neck and silently admonished himself. He should have known this day was coming.

When he had met Charles V, the king’s frailty was obvious, and when he’d died fifteen years later, the dauphin was not yet twelve. The implications of the struggle between the king’s brothers, the inferiority of their minds, and frivolity of their interests, could have been predicted by a baker’s boy. Before they had even buried their beloved king, the Duke d’Anjou had swooped into the library and taken eighty of the most precious manuscripts; and, worse yet, had seized a large portion of the crown’s treasury. Last year Tommaso’s income had been reduced to one hundred francs a year—a sum that wouldn’t pay a courtier’s tailor—and even that hadn’t been paid in eight months. Still, Tommaso hadn’t made preparations, hadn’t curbed his spending or straightened his affairs. As court astrologer, he had been seeing signs of turbulence in the charts for months, but hadn’t assumed it would be in his own life. There was chaos enough all around to explain it.

He had also assumed that the difficulties of the court wouldn’t visit the royal library, one reason he hid out in it. The splendor of its gleaming wood paneling and the inlaid cypress ceiling had made him proud when he had first arrived from Venice. Doctor and Astrologer to the French Court. Advisor for the selection of scientific treatises and volumes to a king who valued erudition and integrity. Contributing to the greatest library in Europe, with the exception of the Visconti Library in Pavia. And he had worked hard, served well, made himself secure enough

after five years to bring his entire family to live in the king's palace at the Louvre. But he had fooled himself that this good fortune wasn't temporary, that Fortune wasn't fickle; he told himself he had to just sell one more bit of wooded grove, or another gilded box he had been given, and he could continue to keep his sons in doublets and his wife Tessa in new gowns.

Malet motioned Etienne to sit beside his father-in-law as the old man was seized by a convulsive lurch and spit blood into his cloth. Malet, frightened by the blood and still unnerved by the prediction, bolted from the table and took a seat at a sheltered desk by the windows.

Etienne placed a calming hand on Tommaso's shoulder and counted the quills in a clay pot on the table as a way to calm himself. He had never seen blood in his father-in-law's sputum before. Etienne's own father's death two decades ago had been sudden, a mystery the young boy had only half-comprehended; so as an adult now, he had spent the last weeks watching his father-in-law as if trying to memorize every moment.

Tommaso wiped his forehead on his sleeve. "Not a word to the women, Etienne."

The door creaked open again. Etienne bent toward Tommaso. "Your daughter, sir," he whispered, his slender hands gripping the chair back.

"You mean your wife," Tommaso whispered in retort as his lanky, and, he had to admit, homely, daughter strode toward them, curtsied as if it were an insult and put a hand on her hip.

Christine always kept her hair hidden in a wimple and wore a plain, thick, linen dress without a feather or broach. Her pallor didn't quite have the beauty of porcelain and her features weren't dainty. They were nondescript, Tommaso thought. Granted, there wasn't anything deformed or out of proportion about his daughter, but she was just one measure south of interesting. Still, she

was a joy to him, cut of his cloth.

“Christine, your mother lets you up from your spinning?” He tried a light tone as he hid the bloodied cloth inside his sleeve.

She put a flask of wine on the table with resignation. “I’m allowed to bring your refreshment, but not to return with books. If I arrive with a drop of ink on my fingers she’ll lock me away for a fortnight.”

“She only wants what she believes is best,” Tommaso chuckled, though he knew his wife grew twitchy at the mention of scholarship, as if it were an insect she shouldn’t let into her ears.

“What is best for me is to read.” Christine narrowed her blue eyes, fearful that she would break down and cry. If she had less dignity she would huddle under a table in the library all day just to inhale the smell of ink, lulled by the scratch of quills and the murmuring of scribes at work. Her father complained about the scribes’ inactivity, but even the smallest of their tasks was greater than the world she lived in. Her mind was a mouth, watering for a meal, for the sweet slide of words from a book into her brain. There was no peace like reading.

Etienne and Tommaso knew of her hunger for books, and today they watched her face as it tightened in furious, silent argument with her mother. Tommaso had taught her to read at an early age, drilled her in mathematics despite his wife’s protests. He had tried to explain that the daughters of merchants were being taught to read so they could assist their fathers, but his wife would have none of it. No ladies at court could read except the queen, his wife insisted. It was unbecoming. Christine’s superior mind had emasculated her brothers. His sons had accused their father of favoritism, but when he had demanded that they rise to the challenge of their studies,

the boys had struggled and then abandoned them. Still, it meant so much to Christine that he taught her whenever he could. Two months ago he had allowed Christine to read in the library in the afternoons while her child slept, but Madame de Pizan quickly put an end to the arrangement. He had heard nothing but complaints from his daughter since.

Tommaso struggled to his feet and put on a brave face. “Frivolity infuses the whole court, my dear.”

“Our own home, Father.”

Etienne watched Tommaso grip the bookcases as he walked around the room, perhaps to distract Christine from noticing his fever, and Etienne winced with the man’s steps. All the learning in the world, and still a simple chill from the windows could send you to your deathbed. Etienne counted ten steps and then a rest. He’d never seen his father-in-law so sick.

Christine called after her father. “I’m reduced to gathering the crumbs of your conversations.”

Etienne was irritated that Christine didn’t notice her father’s infirmity. What kind of heart did Christine have that she couldn’t see her father’s situation? Would she treat her own husband with the same blindness when he grew old? Maybe that was the lot of women, though, of families, to be so shackled to one another that, out of vulnerability to the big things, they focused on the small. Unable to heal her husband on his deathbed, a wife will sew a leather tie, a slender tether, on his doublet.

“Patience, daughter.” Tommaso moved farther into the library to hide his pallor from her.

2

Patience, she thought. I never possessed you in large measure, and so you are often overtaken in me by great bitterness. He said patience, but he meant postponement. Christine reached out a furious hand and swept up quills from their pot. “Why is this so unbecoming?” she called, brandishing them. “Is Hell about to yawn open now that a woman holds a quill?”

When she received no answer, Christine sighed deeply and tossed the quills onto the table. This morning when her mother had castigated her for doing math at the table the maid had had to close the windows against Christine’s screaming. No one understood: the rage she suppressed was scaling on her skin. Lizard skin was growing across her shoulders.

Her mother, her enemy, Tessa de Pizan, olive-skinned, with dark hair that was now gray, so low to the ground that Christine thought she looked like a footstool with a face, had sneered at her daughter, “You think only of yourself and your amusement; I have an entire family to consider. What kind of marriage could your brothers make, shown up by your wit? For what stations could they be considered? Have you seen another woman in the library? Seen a book written by a woman there? Never. Bringing a woman into the library—even to read—invites displeasure and ruination for your father. You’re like a base stone whining that it wants to be the cantilever. What happens when the stone leaves its place, Christine? Disaster. Your hungry mind would bring hungry bellies to the entire family. Better to sacrifice one than to bring ruin on us all.”

“Then you admit that I am the lamb at your slaughter!” Christine had barked back.

“There is dignity to be found even in the lamb’s position,” her mother had said, quieting herself. “Besides, if you wanted to be such a scholar, why didn’t you become a nun so you could shut yourself away all day with your blasted books and no one would have to witness your shame? Men have only their power, Christine. They have no beauty and they have very small hearts. You covet what is theirs and you court their wrath. Besides, do you see scholars of *any* type in this court any longer?”

“Too few,” Christine had grumbled her agreement.

“Do you see men who travel in from the East and who are honored for their wisdom? So that a woman might slip among them undetected? No longer. We buried that life with the king. A scholar in this court is a pig in a hen house.”

“You’re right in that, madam.”

“All the more reason you would be an outcast. A woman babbling about some topic no one else knows is what, Christine?”

“A woman with her mind being fed!”

“Is easy prey to those who find the Devil in women’s amusements.”

The Devil! Was it the Devil inside her that made her want this? Well, it must be, because Christine could see herself picking up her own mother by the belt and heaving her out the window. She could imagine the old woman sailing down the parapet to the stones below them. No remorse, no regret; it took everything Christine had not to do it. She had been so convinced that any movement might unleash her fury that Christine hadn’t moved except to clench her

teeth.

“You say it is inappropriate for a woman to be learned because it is so rare, but I say it is even less fitting for a man, my brothers, to be ignorant, as it is so common.”

Madame de Pizan had shrieked and stormed toward her daughter as the maid waved a twig hearth-broom between them to keep them separated.

Christine’s head constantly roiled with questions, but what was she was told? To sit elsewhere. To sit with the decorative and petite, the loveliest French women in the kingdom here at court, all flirty and chirping in their fine veils with little strings of beads entwined from collars to fingers and stitching that required tiny movements, with quiet little voices, platitudes, and sympathetic nods, little birds on a twig. Christine felt enormous, ferocious by comparison, a raptor among bluebirds.

Last week the queen had taken her entourage out to the back gardens and all the women had sat on stone benches to receive foreign scholars, the first in years. But her mother, the troll, had held her by the back of the dress and waved the rest of the women in ahead of them, bowing and smiling, until Christine and her mother were in the far reaches near the hedges. The queen had been shown the latest inventions and told news from northern countries. Those in the front near the queen received food and drink and heard the presentations, but no one could rise before the queen, so Christine and her mother baked motionless in a brutal and unexpected sun. Christine watched the boxes open, the scrolls unfurled, unable to participate. What were they saying? What new ideas were being wasted on the little birds in their fine dresses?

“Don’t try your wit on me, girl. I’ve heard and seen,” her mother had countered this morning.

“While you’re off tromping the woods, raising your children like barn rats, I listen. The ladies talk.”

Christine had made herself appear placid. She withdrew from the boundaries of her skin until she was a tiny ball deep inside herself. How small could she get before she disappeared? How still would they force her to be? How did other women manage to not explode like sausage on a fire? She admired them for it. She longed for it. It was the way she should be. Her hunger was unnatural. It was a crime against nature: everyone said so. It was a deformity, like a sixth toe that mustn’t be seen.

Christine wore plain dresses because she knew that, like a woman whose hunchback rips cloth, her deformity made fine things impossible. Given free time, she paced from the rooms to the gardens, the river, the abbey, the river, the garden, another pass by the library. She rarely sat. Now she had a child on the hand and one at the breast, but she still found ways to tromp around and return with lichen to investigate, with a question about ancient peoples. She often fell to her knees and dug in the loam to see a root structure; she waded into the creek to collect moss. If she had been a man, she would have brought cuttings back from the Holy Lands. Two days ago she had burst back into the castle from the creek side, jubilant with her findings and chattering away to her five-year-old daughter, Marie, about the fish skeleton she cradled in her hands. But as the two of them stepped farther into the hallway they had encountered the queen and her company.

Her mother, walking with the tiny birds, had shrieked at the dirt on the front of Christine’s dress, at the swamp scum clinging to her skirt, and Christine had become mortified at her condition. She’d smoothed her hair back into the wimple but only smeared mud across her face

while her nostrils filled with the smell of muck. She'd then curtsied deeply and secreted the skeleton into one sleeve while grabbing her daughter's hand. In their chambers, Christine had washed both her daughter and herself with rough strokes. She was like a drunkard who would do anything to satisfy her craving. And just like a drunkard, there was no sating it. Still, Christine wondered how the women at court kept from boiling over with curiosity. She was incendiary most of the day.

"And of course you're not content to just read a book. Oh, no," her mother had continued this morning. "You want to lecture. Lecture men? They'd stone you before the end of your first utterance."

"Novella d'Andrea lectured in Bologna, and her sister Bettina in Padua, Mother."

"She did so occasionally...in her father's place. Her father's material. From behind a screen. And do you know why that is, Christine?" Her mother drew up within inches of Christine's chest. Christine threw her shoulders back and straightened the front of her gown.

"To shield men from her beauty, Christine. Wisdom is only tolerated in the beautiful; and you, my dear, are no beauty."

In the library, Etienne rose and irritably gathered the quills from the table. Fourteen quills and two piercing sticks. Count to remain calm. The surety of numbers, of order. Etienne wanted to shout to his wife to tend to her father, but he honored Tommaso's choice of secrecy.

On the other hand, Etienne had to admit that he sympathized with his wife's plight. For a short time after their marriage, they had had their own quarters and he had brought books home

to her, watching her react like another woman would to a gift of silk. When economy had forced the family into a single apartment, her mother had ended Christine's reading, and Etienne had watched his wife pace as if caged.

It was pressure on Etienne that no one else saw: on the one side his dying and increasingly destitute father-in-law; on the other, his own stifled and increasingly furious wife. But a book was all it would take to cure the one side, and a volume had arrived this morning that would fit the bill like no other, though it had come unsolicited and was sure to be rejected for duplication. He gently touched Christine's elbow and turned to his father-in-law. He wondered if he should ask Tommaso or Gilles' permission first, but he proceeded. "Actually, we have something new that needs inspection, don't we, Monsieur de Pizan?"

Etienne paced to Tommaso's side and spoke privately. "The volume that arrived yesterday: what chance is there that someone would notice this volume missing...I mean, being read elsewhere? Especially that particular volume."

Tommaso curled his hot hand around Etienne's forearm. Of all the books that might appease his daughter, this one would do the trick, most certainly. While he had a wife who swatted at knowledge and a homely daughter with great brains that she shouldn't use, flanked by twin sons with minds of dough, at least he was blessed with a tender son-in-law who had been given a lifetime appointment to the court, and as he watched Etienne try to appease Christine, gratitude brought blood to his pale cheeks.

"You have a jewel of a husband here, my girl," Tommaso called from across the library. "Show her, Etienne. You've never seen the likes of it, Christine."

Etienne gathered a large volume from a side table and set it on the table in front of her.

“Boccaccio has just written a treatise, Concerning Famous Women.”

“Women?” Christine scoffed. “Real women?”

“Famous and notorious women of the pagan world, Christine. It’s the first of its kind. You should read it for us, shouldn’t she, Father?”

“Yes, yes,” Tommaso laughed indulgently from his hiding spot. “We...can’t keep up.”

She lifted it to her chest with effort and smelled the delicious edge of its parchment pages. Burgundy leather, brass clasps, the book was so large that it spanned the width of her shoulders. “And, Mother?” she called to the bookshelves in her father’s direction.

“Discretion is advised, daughter. Save me from your mother’s blasting tongue.”