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Troyes, France
Summer 4851 (1091 C.E.)

achel's fingers rifled through the chest that held her most valuable belongings, searching once more for the parchment she had dug out no less than ten times that week. Taking a deep breath, she forced her shaking hands to steady themselves so she could read from the conditional divorce's text.

In case I do not return after an absence of six months: . . . I, Eliezer ben Shemiah of the town of Arles . . . , being of sound mind and under no constraint; I do release and send away and put aside you, Rachel bat Salomon, who have been my wife from time past to the present . . . that you may have permission and control over yourself to go to be married to any man whom you desire. . . . This shall be from me to you a bill of dismissal, a document of release, and a letter of freedom, according to the Law of Moses and Israel.

Shemayah ben Jacob, a witness

Moses haCohen, a witness

After a night of fervent lovemaking, she and Eliezer had kissed good-bye on the last Sunday in December, following the close of the winter Cold Fair, which meant that the six months would be over next week. Already merchants were arriving for summer's Hot Fair, but none of them carried a letter for her. Clearly her thoughtless husband could not be bothered to write that he would be delayed. Had he never considered how much she would worry?

Rachel started to clench her fists but caught herself before crumpling the precious document, her conditional *get*.

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A pox on Eliezer! He had no idea what it was like for her, all those anxious days and long lonely nights, wondering what could have detained him.

It would serve her husband right if she went to the *beit din* on Thursday, six months and a day since he'd left, presented his conditional *get*, and became divorced. Of course she'd have to wait another three months before marrying another, by which time he'd surely have arrived home. Then Eliezer would be the one to wait and suffer while she took her time deciding whether to reconcile, or not. The thought was a delicious one, but would she dare go through with it?

She took another deep breath. He was probably waiting for a ship to arrive with his merchandise, or he was negotiating a contract with someone who might well take advantage of his need to hurry. Rachel could think of a dozen legitimate reasons why Eliezer had not yet arrived.

She scowled down at the paper in her hand. When a decent husband, a loving husband, knows he'll be late, he makes an effort to inform his wife. Her anger flared once more as she imagined Eliezer going about his business in Maghreb, perhaps enjoying a tryst with a local serving wench, with nary a thought of his faithful wife fretting at home.

But there was another reason for the delay, and it was one she shuddered to merely consider. What if something awful had delayed him, something that rendered him incapable of writing her? Rachel suddenly envisioned Shemiah and Asher, Eliezer's father and brother, swept away in a rain-swollen river six years ago after their ferry capsized during a routine trading mission to Prague.

Please, mon Dieu, protect my husband and bring him safely back to me.

Perhaps sensing her disquiet, little Rivka began to stir in her cradle. Rachel hurriedly locked the paper away and gathered her one-year-old daughter to her chest. The baby pawed at her chemise to find her breast as Rachel lay back in bed to nurse. Stroking the small head of dark curly hair, she told herself to be patient. Eliezer had never missed the opening day of the Hot Fair. Surely he'd return before the week was over. And when he did finally show up, she'd make sure that he'd never be late again without informing her.

She let out a soft sigh. Stop agonizing over Eliezer, she told herself sternly. Think about how your daughter's smiles make you melt inside, of

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how proud you are that five-year-old Shemiah is learning to read Torah so quickly. Imagine the prices you'll get for the jewelry you've taken in pawn.

But none of these lovely thoughts could keep her mind from churning; whatever had happened to her husband?

Eliezer woke to the sound of birds twittering above and thanked Heaven he was still alive. He could smell something cooking and his empty stomach clenched in pain. There was a cramp in his right leg, but when he tried to stretch, he couldn't move. They had tied him even tighter than usual last night.

How many days had he been a prisoner here, tied to a tree somewhere in the Forest of Burgundy? One week at least. How long before some merchants rode through here, Jews who would ransom him?

Eliezer heard the crunching of leaves and cracked open an eye to see who was coming. He had learned to feign sleep whenever his captors approached, as two of them were crueler than the others. Fortunately, these worn boots belonged to one of the youngest members of the gang, a youth barely into his teens who brought water several times a day.

"Jehan," Eliezer whispered, and the youth squatted down next to him. "Can you loosen the knot on my right leg?" When Jehan did nothing, Eliezer added, "Just a little so I can get rid of this cramp."

Jehan helped him sit up and drink from the battered tin cup. "I can't right now. They might see."

"Can you at least help me up so I can piss properly?"

As Jehan pulled him to his feet and lifted his chemise, a man called out, "Hey, what are you doing with the prisoner?"

"Can't you see?" he yelled back. Then he whispered to Eliezer, "I told you they were watching."

Eliezer was so weak he could barely stand, but at least he didn't have to relieve himself on the dirt where he lay. Most of the men found it amusing when he messed himself. "Tell me, how did you come to live among these thieves?"

Jehan bowed his head to whisper. "Besides me, there were five brothers and sisters, too many for our father's small plot to support. When our mother died, my brother decided to make his escape and I came along."

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He winced at the memory. "The gang discovered us in the forest, lost and starving, and we've been here ever since."

Eliezer nodded. Jehan's story was similar to that of many runaway villains. He sank back down and waited. *The first thing I'll do when I'm ransomed is have a bath. If I'm ever ransomed.*

Fear began to gnaw at him once again.

Soon the daily ritual would begin. Someone would come and offer him a handful of bacon. The first day, Eliezer politely reminded them that Jews don't eat pork and asked would they please bring him something else to eat. The pork was removed, but nothing replaced it. The same thing happened the second day, and the third. Why were they torturing him like this? Even out here in the forest the men must have other foodstuffs.

By the fourth day, Eliezer was so hungry that he began to consider eating the bacon. The mitzvot were to live by, not die by, and if he didn't eat something soon, he would starve. He knew very well that some Jews did eat pork, especially if they were in a tavern far from home. He'd been tempted to try it himself when the other fare smelled rotten.

But he wasn't just any Jew. He was a Talmud scholar. And not just any scholar, but the son-in-law of Salomon ben Isaac, the rosh yeshiva of Troyes. It would need to be a matter of life or death before he sinned so publicly. *And if I don't have something to eat soon, it will be.*

He barely had the strength to roll over to face the main camp, but he wanted to see who would be offering him breakfast today. *Merde.* It was Richard, one of the cruel ones, whose grating voice made Eliezer's skin crawl.

"Here, Jew." Richard grabbed Eliezer's head by the hair and waved the bacon under Eliezer's nose. "You must be hungry by now. Have some nice hot bacon. We cooked it just for you."

Eliezer might have been tempted if Jehan had offered him the food, but he wasn't going to give his tormentor such satisfaction. Usually he turned his head away, but this time he spat on the bacon. He managed to spit on Richard's hand as well.

"Damn you." Richard slammed Eliezer's head to the ground, and Eliezer saw stars. He curled himself into a ball as blows continued to rain upon him.

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Suddenly an authoritative voice bellowed, "Leave him alone. I told you to offer him the bacon and report his response back to me."

"He didn't eat it, Master Geoffrey."

"I can see that, you idiot."

From his position on the ground, Eliezer couldn't see who his protector was. His head spun. Why were his captors starving him? It didn't make sense. If they'd wanted to kill him, they could have done it days ago.

Trying to ignore the pain, Eliezer considered his situation. This disaster was his own damn fault. Just before he'd planned to leave Fustat, he'd learned of an alum trader due to arrive from Damascus any day. With alum always in short supply, the profit at the Hot Fair would be worth the wait. When the trader with the alum arrived the following week, Eliezer was sure he could get home to Rachel in time. But the ship carrying him and his stock across the Great Sea was harried by storms, and reports of pirates kept her close to the coast. By the time he reached his mother's house in Arles, all the merchants had already left for Troyes. His only chance to get there before the fair opened was to ride out alone, leaving his goods to follow.

His mother warned him not to ride through Burgundy, that the woods were infested with rogues and bandits, and that so many merchants had been waylaid. Now only the largest, most well-guarded caravans would attempt it. But he was in too much a hurry to travel by the safer, slower river route. Rachel had been furious the last time he'd been late, accusing him of thoughtlessness and worse. If he missed his six-month deadline, she might be angry enough to divorce him, just to make him woo her again.

So he hired the fastest horse in Arles and for the first few days savored his good luck. That's when the highwaymen surrounded him. He fought the best he could, but they threw a net over him and dragged him off his horse. Immediately he was disarmed, blindfolded, and carried off to their camp—where they offered him nothing to eat but bacon.

Eliezer groaned and tears welled in his eyes. He'd only gotten into this fiasco because he was so worried about being delayed. Now he'd never get back to Rachel in time. He'd starve to death in the God-forsaken forest, and his family would be left with no answers. They would have no idea what had befallen him.

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Jehan appeared above him. "Master Geoffrey wants to see you. Can you walk?"

"I won't know until you untie me."

Even with Jehan's support, Eliezer could only take a few steps before he grew faint. The youth ran off toward the main camp, telling him to wait. As if he had any other option, Eliezer thought bitterly.

It wasn't long before he heard several men making their way through the brush. Jehan reached him first, helping him sit up against a tree. Three other men squatted down next to him, including Richard and another fellow that Eliezer recognized as Jehan's older brother. Eliezer had never seen the third man before, but the way the others were looking at him, waiting for him to speak, he was clearly their superior.

"Shall I feed him, Geoffrey?" Jehan's brother asked. "Or do you want to question him first?"

Geoffrey nodded at Jehan and his brother. "Feed him."

Jehan untied Eliezer's arms and his brother held out a cup, followed by a plate. The cup contained ale, not water, but Eliezer gulped it down without a thought of its quality. The stuff on the plate looked like fish, but he sniffed it to be sure. There were also some mashed roots, probably turnips. Eliezer didn't care what they were. He forced himself to eat slowly; who knew when he'd eat again, and Heaven forbid he should vomit up this meal.

He had many questions, but instead he forced a smile and said, "I don't suppose you have any bread."

Geoffrey chuckled. "*Pardonnez-moi*, but we have no bakeries in our forest."

Those few words were enough for Eliezer to identify Geoffrey's accent as belonging to a member of the nobility. "I'm Eliezer ben Shemiah of Troyes." He bowed slightly. "I'm sure you'll understand if I don't say what a pleasure it is to meet you."

"My name is Geoffrey . . ." He hesitated.

"Geoffrey de . . . ?" Eliezer revealed that he recognized the man's noble status.

"I was raised in Saulieu, but I'm Geoffrey de Bois now." He motioned for Jehan to pour Eliezer more ale.

"So Geoffrey de Bois, what are you planning to do with me?"

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"That's what you're going to help me decide," Geoffrey murmured. "My original intent was to ransom you, but there have been so few other merchants that I've despaired of finding one to send for the payment."

"Of course there are no others coming by. Between Duke Odo's henchmen and yours, these woods are so dangerous people will go days out of their way to avoid them."

"I realize that now, which is why I had to test you."

Eliezer swallowed hard. "Test me?"

"I assumed that you were a Jew, and I knew I was right when you refused the bacon. But I needed to know how pious you were, whether I could trust your word if you took an oath."

"What sort of oath do you intend me to take?"

Geoffrey locked eyes with him. "I want you to swear that if I let you go, you will return with the ransom we agree upon, not in coins, but in food and supplies for my men."

Richard jumped up, his face burning with anger. "Have you lost your mind, trusting a Jew like that? You let him go and we'll never see him again."

"And what do you suggest we do with him?" Geoffrey's voice was icy.

"Kill him. Sell those jewels he was carrying."

Eliezer paled and fought back his panic.

"You idiot," Geoffrey said. "The reason the Duke of Burgundy tolerates us in his forest is because we haven't killed anyone, and it's far too much trouble for his sergeants to track us down when we're just trifling with merchants. But if we try to sell such obviously stolen property as jewels—first, no Jew will buy them because he knows they belong to another Jew. Second, we have no idea how to find somebody else to buy them, someone who won't cry out 'thief' and collect a reward from the Jews for his effort."

The recipient of this lecture remained silent, sulking at his rebuke. Jehan's brother rubbed salt in Richard's wound by pointing out that none of them had any idea what Eliezer's jewels were worth, so that even in the unlikely event of finding a fence to buy them, they'd never get as good a price as his ransom anyway.

"If we don't kill him, if we just let him go," the gravelly voice snarled. "How do we know he'll come back with the ransom?"

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"You have my jewels," Eliezer spoke up. "Keep them as security against my return. You may not be able to sell them, but if you have them, I can't sell them either."

As the three men considered this, Eliezer turned to Geoffrey. "You'll have my oath. I will return."

"Bah!" Richard spat. "You can't trust the word of a Jew."

Eliezer's mind was working furiously. "Wait, I have another idea."

"Go on," Geoffrey said.

"What if, instead of attacking Jewish merchants and holding them for ransom, you charge them a toll for safe passage through the forest?" Eliezer took a breath before continuing, knowing full well that his life depended on his ability to persuade them. "You have plenty of men. If there are enough to escort a caravan and protect it from Odo's henchmen, most merchants will gladly pay for the service."

"They might," Jehan's brother said. "Since it's the shortest route from Marseille to Troyes."

"Duke Odo won't like it if we stand between his men and travelers in his forest." The brute's raspy voice rose into a whine.

"On the other hand, Odo's men have stooped to assaulting pilgrims, and I wouldn't mind putting an end to that," Geoffrey replied. "Especially if it meant more income for us."

"If you offer to share some of your fees with Odo, I bet the duke will take his cut and not bother you," Eliezer said. "And that's where I can be of use. Members of Odo's court always attend Troyes' fair, and I can negotiate with them for you."

"Don't believe him." The cruel one's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "The Jew will lie through his teeth to escape, and then he'll lead Odo right to us."

"Let me give it some thought." Geoffrey began to walk away, then halted and leaned in to Jehan. "You can feed the prisoner whatever the others are eating, but no more bacon."

Salomon ben Isaac was pacing.

"Shall I go and get them?" Meir, Salomon's son-in-law, asked. "We don't want the visiting scholars to wait too long for today's Talmud session."

The tension was palpable, and each small noise caused Meir's eyes to

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jump nervously up the steep staircase that led to the women's gallery. Standing next to Meir in the synagoue entryway, a merchant shifted and removed his cloak.

Judah, Salomon's second son-in-law, shook his head. "Meir, today's lesson will be delayed in any case once Rachel hears the news."

Salomon, feeling older than his fifty-one years, looked up and sighed. "There's my wife coming now."

Rivka, her plump face unlined despite the grey curl that escaped her veil, stood at the top of the stairs, her two oldest granddaughters supporting her on either side. A moment later, Salomon's three daughters followed.

Joheved, the eldest, leaned heavily on the banister as she turned the corner, and Salomon smiled at the telltale bulge at her midsection. So she was finally pregnant again. The loss of her baby boy, Salomon's namesake, to smallpox two years ago had been devastating for her and Meir, and Salomon prayed regularly for another son to replace him. But Joheved had barely survived the child's breech birth, and with two sons and two daughters, he had begun to suspect that she was drinking a sterility potion.

At least we have some good news to balance the bad, he thought, as he watched Rachel and Miriam walk down. Each carried a little girl in her arms whose straight or curly locks matched her mother's. How had he managed to father two such dissimilar sisters? Miriam was slim, almost skinny considering that she was the mother of four, with long reddish brown hair and hazel eyes. She and Joheved were not unattractive, but neither of them could compare with their younger sister's beauty.

Rachel's perfect oval face, framed by bouncy black curls, was lovely enough, but it was impossible not to be captured by her striking emerald green eyes, a feature she emphasized by wearing that color regularly. As for her figure, she was plump where a woman ought to be plump.

Now that he thought about it, each of his daughters was unique. His eldest, Lady Joheved of Ramerupt-sur-Aube, ran Meir's small feudal estate as if she were born into nobility instead of the family of a poor vintner. Calm and competent, nothing seemed to rattle her.

Miriam was the compassionate one, the curious one—good traits for a midwife who was always looking for new herbs and treatments for her patients. Rachel had barely known Salomon's mother, Leah, but she was the one who followed in her grandmama's entrepreneurial footsteps.

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Clever and resolute, Rachel not only helped to manage the family's wine-making enterprise, but she also ran a business that lent money to women.

To be honest, she had been his favorite daughter since she was little, and he had long since given up trying to hide his preference.

Three daughters and no sons; yet Salomon couldn't imagine trading any of them for a boy. One quality they shared equally, the one that most filled him with pride, was their devotion to Talmud study. Scholars themselves, each girl had married a man even more learned than herself, and between them he now had six grandsons.

His reverie was cut short as Rachel reached the bottom of the stairs. Dark circles beneath those green eyes marred her beauty, and her usually smiling face was drawn. He knew what was worrying her, and it still pained him to see the physical proof of her anxiety.

"Rachel." He cleared his throat. "There is someone here to speak with you."

The merchant wasted no time on pleasantries. "I have some disturbing news for you, Mistress Rachel." He paused as she instinctively reached to clutch Salomon's arm for support. "I accompanied your husband from Fustat to Marseilles. He asked me to bring his merchandise to Troyes along with my own." The merchant swallowed hard and continued, "He said he was in a hurry, that he would ride on ahead."

Rivka grabbed the baby as Rachel grew pale and her legs nearly gave beneath her. Blinking back tears, she whispered what all of them were wondering. "If Eliezer left first on horseback, while you traveled with the loaded carts, please tell me why he isn't home yet."