



One

Troyes, France

Spring 1067

"Come here, kitten." Joheved wiggled a piece of string in front of the synagogue woodpile. "Come out and play."

Her younger sister, Miriam, tossed a few small pieces of cheese near the string and the two girls waited. Soon a small gray tabby crept out toward the cheese, followed by its gray and white sibling. Next an orange striped kitten stuck its head out, and finally another gray tabby.

"Don't throw them any more cheese," Joheved whispered. "Make them come to us."

Miriam held out her hand, and soon two of the kittens were licking the cheese off it. Joheved's mouth watered, but there wasn't enough cheese for both her and the kittens.

"Now," Joheved hissed.

She dived for the gray and white kitten as Miriam grabbed the other. But it was too fast for her.

"Ow," Miriam yelled as the gray tabby scratched her hand to free itself.

A moment later the four kittens were hiding under the woodpile and Miriam was crying. "Now what are we going to do?" she wailed. "It will take weeks for them to trust us again and we have to catch them before Papa comes home at Shavuot."

Joheved sat down on the ground and blinked back tears. It was Mama's idea for them to catch a pair of kittens. The whole thing started a month ago, during Passover, when Papa stayed up so late studying that he was too tired to put his books away when he went to bed. Either that or he fell asleep while he was studying; Joheved never found out which. In any case, he left his manuscripts out all night, and when he woke up the next morning, it was clear that mice had eaten some of them.

Joheved winced as she remembered how he'd cursed and thrown a dish at the mouse hole. And that was just the beginning of that terrible morning. Grandmama Leah heard the crash, came downstairs, and started yelling at him. She scolded her son Salomon that it was his fault for not putting his things away and for having a tantrum when he should have known that mice would eat any parchment he left lying around.

Grandmama Leah continued to berate her son. "Do you realize how much new dishes cost? Do you think they grew on trees?" She carried on about how little money they had, and now she had to buy new parchment as well as new crockery. "Have you no consideration for all the sacrifices I made so you could study at the Talmud academy in Mayence?"

Poor Papa. He just stood there in silence; he couldn't talk back to his mother. When Grandmama Leah finally had her say, or at least ran out of breath, he was so upset that he bashed his fist against the wall. Joheved could still hear the sound of wood splintering.

He hit the wood so hard that he broke his hand. Grandmama Leah could see at once that he was in terrible pain and sent Joheved to fetch the doctor. In the end, Papa's hand swelled up terribly, and it hurt him the whole time he was home.

He had no sooner left for Mayence than Mama took Miriam and Joheved aside after services and asked them to follow a certain calico cat that lived at the synagogue.

"That cat used to be pregnant, but now she's thin again," Mama told them. "If you can find where she's hidden her kittens, maybe you can catch one or two for our house. Then Papa won't have to worry about mice anymore."

They followed the cat for days until they finally found her hiding place under the woodpile. Then Mama gave them some small pieces of cheese to feed the kittens to start taming them. At first all Joheved and Miriam could do was put the cheese down and stand back while the mother cat hissed at them. But eventually the kittens got used to the girls' presence and began playing with their strings.

Miriam's continued sobs interrupted her sister's reverie. "Joheved, we need to go home. My arm is bleeding."

"Just wrap it with the bottom of your chemise for now," Joheved said. "There's a well on Rue de la Cité. We can wash there."

"But my chemise will get all stained."

"Then use mine." Joheved held up the corner of her underskirt as they headed toward the street.

Miriam pressed her other hand against the wound. "That's no use. I'll still end up wearing it when you've outgrown it."

"We can't give up on the kittens," Joheved said. "Not after they've gotten used to us feeding them."

"Maybe we can ask for some meat scraps at the butcher's again. The kittens really liked that."

Joheved sighed. It was true that butchers sometimes had scraps left over in the afternoon; most women bought their meat in the morning. "I hate begging there. The butchers must think we want the meat for ourselves."

"Then stay outside and I'll go in by myself."

None of the butchers the Jews usually shopped at had any scraps that afternoon, but two days later they were in luck. As soon as Jacques saw the girls, he called out, "If you can wait, I'll have something for you." He stepped out into the street and looked around. "I have to catch a suckling pig first . . . for a christening."

Pigs roamed most streets in the Jewish Quarter of Troyes. Their owners, who weren't Jewish of course, knew those pigs were perfectly safe, that none of them would "accidentally" disappear into a resident's stewing pot. As long as the pigs stayed out of their courtyards, the Jews tolerated them in their neighborhood. It kept the roads cleaner.

Down the street, a sow and five piglets were busily rooting around where someone had just emptied a pail of garbage. Jacques grabbed a feedbag and advanced on the pigs. Before Joheved could count to ten, he threw the bag over the piglets and snatched up one of them. He carried the squealing creature back to his shop, where Joheved and Miriam waited outside until the piglet's squeals abruptly ceased.

"Here you go." He handed them a small package and smiled. "Good luck catching a kitten."

"That's how we can do it," Joheved said, her eyes shining with excitement. "We'll find an old blanket or sheet and throw it over them while they're eating."

Miriam clapped her hands with glee. "Then they won't be able to scratch us either."

"We'll wait until tomorrow. Then they'll be really hungry."

Sure enough, they arrived home after services the next day with a kitten apiece, one orange striped and one gray and white, rolled up in an old sheet. Their hands were scratched, but they didn't care. Now Papa wouldn't have to worry about mice.

Yet when Rabbi Salomon ben Isaac came home for Shavuot, the festival in late spring that commemorates the Israelites receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, he scarcely noticed the kittens. The grapevines were about to flower, as they did every year at the end of May, and by this time the springtime work in the vineyard should have been complete. But not all the ground between the vines had been hoed free of weeds, and worse yet, leaves still remained on last year's sterile wood—leaves that would only consume the plant's needed sap.

After the festival, instead of leaving immediately for Mayence, Salomon continued to labor in the vineyard with his family. Once the vines flowered, more leaves would need to be removed, this time from the new fruiting wood so that each bunch of baby grapes was exposed to sunlight. And no sooner would the final piece of land be hoed than they would need to start again at the other side.

Summer was Joheved's favorite time to work in the vineyard. The earth between rows was soft and warm, squishing pleasantly between her bare toes as she and Miriam attached the grape-laden stems to their trellis. The leafy vines were only slightly taller than the girls were, offering excellent conditions for hide-and-seek games. It was also fun to look for caterpillars and snails hiding among the leaves. But they couldn't bring themselves to squash them with bare feet, so they took the bugs to Grandmama Leah, who saw the small foragers as thieves and furiously dispatched each one with a stamp of her booted heel.

Joheved disliked hoeing; her back and arms always hurt after a day of it. Papa apparently didn't like hoeing either, because she often saw him hacking angrily at the weedy ground. Once she heard him curse when he accidentally dug too deep and dislodged a grapevine's roots.

"When is Papa going back to Germany?" Joheved asked her grandmother one afternoon. He had never stayed into the summer before.

"He'll be leaving any day now," Leah replied as she tied a new shoot to the trellis with a piece of straw.

But two weeks later, when the Hot Fair opened, Papa was still in

Troyes. When Grandmama Leah again told her that he would be leaving sometime soon, Joheved decided to ask him herself. Instinct told her to ask him privately, but it was difficult to find the right time. He remained after services with the Jewish merchants who attended the fair, and he stayed out late at night with them as well, so she was asleep when he came home.

She knew better than to disturb him when he was studying, but it seemed that his head was always bent over some manuscript. Joheved had peeked inside one of them when he was outside using the privy in the courtyard, and while she could recognize the Hebrew letters immediately, it took a while to realize that the words weren't Hebrew, but Aramaic, the same as in Grandmama Leah's *Targum* translation of the Torah.

But unlike reading the Torah, which Joheved did easily now, she couldn't understand what this manuscript said. She knew most of the words, but the text didn't make any sense. As she read further, she could see that many words seemed to be missing, but before she could figure anything out, she heard Papa at the door. She quickly returned the manuscript to where he'd left it and bolted for the kitchen.

In the vineyard it was difficult to see him among all the vines, but her opportunity to confront him came in midsummer when she was thinning the leaves surrounding each cluster of grapes not far from where he was hoeing weeds. She only knew he was there because she could hear him.

It sounded like he was crying.

Joheved crept around the end of the row and there was her father, leaning on his hoe, his shoulders shaking as he wept. She immediately stepped back, hiding herself behind the vines, and waited for him to quiet. Then she poked her head out.

He was hoeing again so she gathered her courage and approached him. "Papa?"

He sniffed a couple of times before responding. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter. I was wondering if you're going back to Germany after the fall holidays?"

"No." He sighed and it looked like he might start crying again. But then his voice hardened with anger. "I have to stay here at least through the winter, to make sure the vineyard gets pruned properly for

a change."

Joheved ran back to where she'd been trimming leaves. She didn't know what she'd done to annoy him, but she was sure Papa wouldn't want to talk about it.

Joheved thought that Papa might return to Mayence when the pruning was done, but by then Mama was pregnant, which meant even fewer people to work the vineyard. He didn't leave after Passover either; the baby was close to being born by then. Huddled in their mantles, Joheved and Miriam helped in the frigid vineyard as much as possible. The calendar might say it was springtime, but it never seemed to get warm, not even at noon.

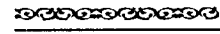
One night the cold forced Joheved awake. Sure that Miriam was comfortably wrapped in more than her share of bedding, Joheved reached out for the covers, only to find them still in their proper place, topped by the rough blanket that Mama had woven from their first clumsy attempts to spin thread from raw wool. There wasn't a hint of morning light, so Joheved snuggled under the covers, determined to ignore her discomfort and find sleep again. Her feet were freezing, but getting up to find her hose would just make them colder. If only she and Miriam could have a charcoal brazier in their room at night.

She sighed.

Why did Mama and Papa have to be so secretive about being poor? Did they think they could protect her from poverty by never mentioning it, by telling her that only babies and old people needed their rooms heated once Passover was finished? A girl in her twelfth year was old enough to be told the truth. Joheved rubbed her feet against each other to warm them and bumped into something small lying at the edge of the bed. The room's silence was broken by purring.

Joheved nudged the cat and moved her feet onto the warm spot the creature had occupied. Pleased at this solution, she listened to the small noises outside as she waited for sleep to overtake her. Every so often, the clip-clop of horses' hooves or crunch of cartwheels echoed on a nearby road. What errands kept someone away from home at this hour, when the demon Agrat bat Machlat and her eighteen myriads stalked the night outside?

Joheved shivered and pulled the blankets tighter around her. She had just about drifted off when a low-pitched moan, like someone in



pain, jerked her back to consciousness. But this noise wasn't from outside; it was coming from just beyond the bedroom door. Terrified of what had to be an approaching demon, Joheved dived under the covers and grabbed for Miriam.

And felt no one.

A frantic search proved that Joheved was alone in their bed. Convinced that the demon who had somehow taken Miriam was coming for her, she recited the words she'd been taught to say if evil spirits ever threatened her.

"Be split, be accursed, broken, and banned, you son of mud, son of clay, like Shamgaz, Merigaz, and Istemaah," Joheved whispered through chattering teeth, and then, because incantations said three times were the most powerful, she repeated it twice more. Heart pounding, she waited.

And waited. The cat, still purring, nosed its head under her hand, eager to be scratched. Her fear slowly dissipating, Joheved began to feel both relieved and foolish. How often had she watched the cats chase their invisible prey? Surely no cat would lie so contentedly in her bed if demons lurked nearby.

The world was plagued with evil spirits: from Ashmedai, King of Demons, and Shibeta, who strangles children with croup or whooping cough, to the *cauchmares* who bring on bad dreams and little Feltrech, responsible for tangling a sleeper's long hair at night. There were more demons than there were people. Most feared of all was Lillit, whose prey was women in childbirth and their newborn babies. And Mama was due to give birth any day now.

Mon Dieu, what if Mama was having the baby right now?