

In this historical fantasy novel, a **Sydney Taylor Honor winner**, Ziva will do anything to save her twin brother, Pesah, from his illness—even face the Angel of Death himself.

PESAH HAS LIVED WITH LEPROSY

for years and Ziva has always taken care of him. Recently, Pesah has had a vision: the Angel of Death will come for him on Rosh Hashanah, just one month away. The courageous Ziva runs away with Pesah to find doctors who can cure him.

But when they meet and accidentally free Almas, a half-demon boy, from his captors, Almas pays his debt by leading them to Luz, a fabled city where no one ever dies—and the one place Pesah will be safe. They just need to run faster than the Angel of Death can fly . . .

A Kirkus Reviews Best Book of 2022

"Propulsive, wise, and heartbreaking."

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

"Ziva is a fierce, appealing heroine."

—The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books (starred review)

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Black Bird, Blue Road

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PART ONE

Hello!

Come in.

Sit down.

Don't be scared. This is a very important story, after all, and you shouldn't be afraid to hear it. It's from a very long time ago. A thousand years! In those days, they used to begin their stories like this: *There was one, there was no one*. So that's how I'll begin, too.

There was one. A girl. Ziva bat Leah, the daughter of a judge and the sister of a prophet.

There was no one. No one to believe that Ziva could do the things she set out to do—like find a cure for her brother's illness, or master a demon, or sway the Angel of Death, whom she called *malach ha-mavet*.

Ziva did two of those things, dear listener.

Which two?

Well.

There was one, there was no one. And on the shores of Bahr ul-Khazar, which you call the Caspian Sea, Ziva bat Leah, who didn't know yet about a cure or a demon or *malach ha-mavet*, woke up on her twelfth birthday in the city of Atil, and her first thought was—



ONE



I HAVE TO CUT OFF Pesah's finger today.

Ziva lay on the floor of her twin brother's room, staring at the ceiling. She listened to the wet, thick breaths of Pesah in his bed above her, letting out her own quiet sigh of relief at the sound of his breathing. Even if his breathing did sound terrible, and had sounded that way for weeks. She didn't want to get up, but she needed to do so before anyone went to her room to check on her.

So she got up as quietly as she could so she didn't wake him, folding up the thin sheet and shoving it under Pesah's bed along with the thin straw mattress, and thought about things. About turning twelve years old. That meant she was responsible for herself. No longer were her parents accountable if Ziva broke a law or infringed a rule.

Like the rule against sleeping in Pesah's room with him. Baba's brother, Uncle Sabriel, was a doctor in Samkarsh, and when Pesah had gotten sick, Uncle Sabriel started to make

the trip to Atil every few months to see him. The previous spring, he had recommended that Pesah be moved out of the room he shared with Ziva and into private quarters. Pesah's illness could spread, Uncle Sabriel said. But Ziva and Pesah had been in the same room for two years while Pesah had been sick, and Ziva hadn't developed any of the lesions or white patches that covered Pesah's body. Even though she pointed this out to everyone, they moved Pesah into the room next to hers. They were apart, but they still slept against the same wall, and would tap back and forth to one another as they fell asleep.

Then this spring, Uncle Sabriel had said Pesah should be moved to his own separate building. So, one of the gardens was replanted elsewhere and the land was used for a new building for Pesah to live in. That had been too much. Too far away. No matter how much Ziva tapped on the wall, Pesah wouldn't be able to tap back. So she started sneaking to his house after dark, setting up a bed on the floor.

If she got caught now, even though she was certain she was immune to whatever was making Pesah ill, would she get in even more trouble?

Well, she was also responsible for unwrapping all his careful bandages and looking at how his disease was slowly eating him away. And she was accountable for amputating his fingers and toes as they succumbed to his illness. There were servants who should have been caring for him, but they didn't do it right. So Ziva did it. That deserved some kind of concession. Right?

Before she left, Ziva grabbed her favorite brooch from the table beside Pesah's bed, where she'd put it the night before. Her mother had gotten it for her, even though Ziva was sure it had just been because her mother thought it was pretty, and not because she recognized its greater significance. It was an iron date palm tree with four purple gems clustered where the dates would grow on a real tree. Since the moment she'd gotten it, the brooch hadn't left Ziva's immediate area.

Palm brooch in one hand, Ziva opened Pesah's door and peered out into the gray morning garden, watching for anyone to catch her exiting Pesah's house. No one was around, so she slipped out and hurried to the main house, back to her room. Inside, she observed the messed-up bedsheets she'd arranged the night before, then made the bed haphazardly. A bat mitzvah was responsible for making her own bed, right?

Yes. There'd be a list of new responsibilities for her once her parents found her. Worst of all, now she'd be expected to entertain courting from boys in the city, like Reuven ben Kohen. She stuck her tongue out at the wrinkled sheets atop her bed. *Yuck.*

Pesah still had another year. Even though he was twelve, too. It took boys extra time to grow up, Ziva supposed.

The door opened and she whirled toward it. Setareh, her mother's maid, poked her head into the room and sang softly, "*Tavalodet mobarak!*"

Setareh was from Persia, south of the Khazar Sea, and Ziva knew enough Persian to know what Setareh was saying: *Happy birthday!*

"Thank you, Setareh." Ziva said, heart thumping. If she'd returned five minutes later, Setareh would have caught her sneaking back in.

"Hurry and get dressed," Setareh said. "Your mother has a wonderful gift prepared for you."

Ziva hesitated. Her mother. "Does she have a wonderful gift prepared for Pesah, too?"

Setareh sighed through her nose at Ziva, and that was answer enough.

Setareh left, and Ziva hurried to her wardrobe. She swapped her nightdress for her favorite red-and-cream kaftan with bronze buttons carved like flowers, pinning her palm brooch to the chest. She combed out and braided her long, dark hair, fastening it at the end with a red ribbon. Her mother had bought her the latest hair baubles from Byzantium—combs with jewels and carved ivory figurines affixed to the top—but Ziva had put them in a drawer and never worn them. She wasn't a Byzantine girl. She was a Khazar, and in Khazaria, girls didn't put fancy combs into their hair.

As she checked herself over, she reflected that in Khazaria, girls also didn't cut off their brothers' fingers.

Well, she wouldn't for much longer, because she and Pesah were going to find a cure soon. Her brilliant brother would come up with a remedy for his disease, cure himself, and then cure everyone else with it, too. She could feel it in her bones.



TWO



ON HER WAY TO PESAHI'S HOUSE, Ziva did a lap around the front courtyard, looking for any pebbles that would make good skipping stones. Before Pesah's illness had taken the use of his hands, they'd spent hours skipping stones on the river. They would again, Ziva knew, and she was going to be prepared for that day.

There! She snatched one up, inspecting its smooth, flat surface. It was perfect. She brushed some dust off it before dropping it in her pocket, and as it settled against her leg, someone walked into the courtyard. A messenger, from the look of him. He was road-weary and dirty, and when he saw Ziva, he let out a sigh of relief and approached her.

He bowed. "Good morning. Are you a lady of this house?"

Ziva returned his bow and hesitated a moment. "I am."

He opened the satchel at his side and handed her a scroll. "A letter from Samkarsh."

She brightened. Uncle Sabriel was the only person she knew who lived in Samkarsh, and she grinned as she took the letter from the messenger. He'd probably written to send birthday wishes to Ziva and Pesah, and to announce his yearly holiday visit. She unrolled it before she thought to pay the messenger, even, and was about to look up from the scroll and apologize when her eyes touched upon a sentence that shocked the smile off her face:

—best course of action is to move Pesah out of Atil and to Samkarsh immediately—

Ziva gaped at that fragment of words, too shocked to even read the next line, until the messenger cleared his throat. She looked up at him, mouth hanging open with surprise, and then realized.

"Oh." She rummaged in her pockets for any money to give him. Uncle Sabriel would have paid him the bulk of the delivery cost, but it was expected to give him something for getting the letter to them safely. She found a little bit and handed it to him. "Sorry. Here. Thank you."

The messenger took the money, thanked her, and left. Ziva stood alone in the courtyard with the opened scroll clutched in her fingers.

Move Pesah out of Atil.

Move Pesah out of Atil?

To Samkarsh, all the way on the other side of the khaganate.

She opened the scroll again.

She read the rest of the sentence:

In light of our previous conversations about Pesah's worsening health, I now believe the best course of action is to move Pesah out of Atil and to Samkarsh immediately, a transition I can accomplish myself when I come for Rosh Hashanah.

Ziva let her arms drop, the scroll half-rolled in her hands. They wanted to take Pesah away from her because he was getting sicker. But then, why weren't they working harder to find a cure for him?

She shook her head as she rolled the scroll up tightly. No. They wouldn't take Pesah. She wouldn't let them. She'd find a cure by then, and everyone would see that Pesah was fine, and he would stay in Atil with Ziva. Ziva darted inside the house and handed the newly rolled-up scroll to the first servant she came across, and then walked as fast as she could to Pesah's house.

Pesah had gotten up while Ziva was gone and was sitting at his window. When he saw Ziva, he brightened and waved. She waved back, deciding not to tell him about the letter, and when she got into his house she stooped to hug him in his chair and said, "Happy, happy birthday."

"Happy birthday, birthday," he said back to her, doing his best to wrap his arms around her. His voice, muffled by the bandages that wrapped around his face, sounded wet. He coughed as he pulled away from Ziva. The cough was wet, too.

He'd had that cough for way too long.

Ziva kept her frown to herself. "Look what I found." She showed him the pebble.

"That's a good one," Pesah said.

Ziva crossed to his biggest bookshelf and set the stone in an empty spot. The shelves were littered with stones between books and journals and other bookshelf things. "For when you're better." She patted the shelf.

Pesah smiled at her. "You're going to run out of shelf space soon."

Ziva shrugged. "We've got a lot of stone skipping to make up for, you know. Close the window so I can look at your skin."

Pesah said, "I'm fine, Ziva." He said that every time, but this time he added, "Plus, Irbis just left. He put new bandages on."

Ziva frowned as she pulled the gauzy curtains over the windows, obscuring Pesah from anyone who might be near his house, but leaving enough light to see by. "Which bandages?"

"My arms," Pesah said, lifting them up to demonstrate.

"It would make me feel better to check myself," Ziva said, knowing Irbis did what her parents told him to do, but there was no way he could take care of Pesah better than Ziva could.

Pesah laughed. "Yes, Doctor."

Ziva pretend-scowled at him. "You know I don't want to be a doctor. That's what *you're* going to do."

"Well, a judge wouldn't dress someone's wounds," Pesah said. "So I can't say, 'Yes, Your Honor.'"

Ziva shrugged. "I mean. You *can*."

Pesah laughed, and Ziva went to the makeshift laboratory that she and Pesah had put together in the spring. They were working on salves that might help Pesah's illness, but two weeks ago Ziva hadn't been paying attention and Pesah had burned his finger. He hadn't even felt it. Irbis had changed Pesah's bandages, sure, but he didn't know about the burn. He didn't know that when Pesah got any kind of wound, it was only a matter of time before it turned dark.

At the laboratory, Ziva reached for a smallish bucket. Inside were a pair of very sharp, shining shears. They were from Uncle Sabriel, who had shown Baba how to use them to amputate Pesah's infected fingers and toes. Ziva had watched, too, lingering in the doorway. And now that Uncle Sabriel had gone back to Samkarsh, and Baba couldn't stomach the blood, and Ziva's mother acted like Pesah was already a ghost, the responsibility of Pesah's amputations fell to Ziva.

The linen cabinet was filled with stacks of clean gauze, and Ziva fetched enough of those to cover Pesah's arms, legs, and face. She had just done his chest yesterday, and his chest was never as bad as the rest of him.

Ziva pulled a stool in front of Pesah and started with his feet and legs. The disease twisted his bones, bending his ankles and swelling his feet so he couldn't hold his

own weight anymore. When Uncle Sabriel found out, he brought a wicker chair with wheels on the bottom so Pesah could be pushed around with ease. It allowed Ziva to take Pesah around the property and through the gardens, even though he always said he was fine in his room.

Pesah didn't look at what Ziva was doing. A medical pamphlet from Byzantium—a gift from Uncle Sabriel—sat on his lap, and he read it while Ziva inspected him. She glanced at the pamphlet once and snorted. It was in Greek, and even though Ziva could write her name out in Greek, she couldn't make sense of the language. Pesah could, plus Latin. And he was good at mathematics, able to do big equations in his head. He had memorized every book in the house. When he could still use his hands, he'd drawn schematics for fabulous but silly inventions, like a lever on a wagon that could stop the wheels from turning, or a machine that spun clothes around to dry them after they were washed. They were still in his room, tucked away on some bookshelf somewhere. It worried her that he never pulled the books down to look at his old sketches, even when Ziva offered to do it for him. She thought she knew why. Even the sage, level-tempered Pesah got sad when he was reminded of the things he couldn't do anymore.

That would change when they figured out a cure. She knew it. He'd be sketching new, ridiculous inventions in no time.

Ziva discarded the old gauze in the bucket and inspected the lesions on his feet and legs. His skin was discolored

by darker patches that surrounded raised flesh-colored or whitish lumps. She used a gauze-wrapped finger to poke one firmly.

Pesah didn't act like he'd felt her touch him at all.

"Pesah," Ziva said.

He looked down at her. "Hm?"

"Does that hurt?"

"Does what hurt?" Then he looked at where she pressed on one of the lumps, blinked, and said, "I don't feel anything."

"That's good, I guess," Ziva said softly. He had these same lumps on his face, hands, and feet, even worse than they were on his arms, legs, and chest. They looked terrible, but at least they didn't hurt.

That day, mercifully, his feet and legs looked no worse. No new lumps, darker discoloration, or infection that Ziva could see. She wrapped Pesah's legs and feet back up in fresh gauze.

"Listen to this, Ziva," Pesah said, nodding at the pamphlet on his lap. "Alchemists in the north have developed a salve that's supposed to keep wounds from darkening."

Ziva perked, her mind jumping to Uncle Sabriel's letter. "A cure?"

Pesah shrugged. "Maybe? There's a recipe here, but the notes say—"

His words were eaten by a wet, racking cough. He turned his head away from Ziva as his entire body coughed, pushing out whatever was inside his lungs. Ziva stood, rubbing

him softly on the back, wishing she could do something—anything—for him.

He coughed out one final, choking sound, gasping in wet and rasping breaths, then said, "Sorry." He cleared the wetness from his throat and said, "Um, the notes say it's imperfect. But it's a start!"

Ziva returned to her stool. "Yeah," she said. "It's a start." She unwrapped his arms and hands.

His arms were much like his legs: splotchy, discolored, covered with lumps and bumps. His hands made Ziva want to scream with frustration. Four of his fingers were already gone, collected by infection, and a fifth, the middle finger of his left hand, was swollen and shiny, and the wicked red color it had been was turning dark, like a bruise.

It smelled like the other fingers had. Uncle Sabriel said when a wound smelled like that, and started to turn black, there was only one thing to do. Something Irbis and the other servants wouldn't do. So Ziva had to.

"What's the recipe call for?" Ziva asked as she picked up the shears. She had to keep talking, had to keep thinking about something other than what she was about to do. This would be the third of his fingers that she'd cut off—Uncle Sabriel had done the first two—but her hands would still tremble if she thought too much about it.

Pesah went back to reading his pamphlet. "The recipe calls for . . . spear-leek, which, I'm not sure what that is. And crop-leek. I don't know what that is either. Two kinds of leeks. We can ask at the market."

Ziva held his infected finger out straight, away from his other fingers, and slipped the shears' blades a tiny way down from where the blackness ended, like Uncle Sabriel had instructed. She didn't want to cut his finger off and leave some of the infection by accident. He'd lose this finger just above the second knuckle, which wasn't as bad as one of the others. That one had been cut all the way down to the webbing between fingers.

She felt eyes on her, and when she looked up, Pesah's blue gaze was fixed on her. Did he look worried? Frightened? Apprehensive?

The bandages on his face shifted up and his eyes crinkled around the edges. He was smiling.

Of course he was smiling. Pesah knew what needed to be done. Someone with less knowledge about infection would beg to keep their fingers, but Pesah understood better than Ziva did what it would mean to leave the finger there.

"Don't worry, Ziva," he said, and his reassurance gave her the strength she needed to pull the handles of the shears together swiftly, smoothly. The infected finger dropped into the bucket and was lost in the gauze there. Pesah didn't so much as flinch. "We'll figure something out."