

Tolerance

by C.C. von Moguntia © 2015

The merchant pulled on the reins to halt his wagon in front of the small village inn. With a worried frown, he turned to look at his wife. "Dinah?"

His son looked up at him and shook his head. "I don't think she heard you, Dad. Her fever... I think it is getting worse." His eyes begged his father for an encouraging word that would make everything all right.

Yishai shook his head. "There is no use. We have to get her inside, to a fireplace, and warm drink and food."

He set the brake and tied the reins around the handle before he climbed from the driver seat. At the cold drizzle, he folded up his collar and walked around to the back of his wagon. He unlatched the tailboard. "Yo'ab, can you wake her?"

"I'll try."

Dinah groaned softly at her son's shaking. When she stirred, a rough, rattling cough wracked her body.

Yishai flinched. "Honey, we arrived at an inn. Can you walk?"

She nodded and labored to raise herself up. Steadying her shaking hands against the flimsy canvas, she climbed over the boxed merchandise to get to her husband.

When she was close enough for Yishai to see her face clearly, he asked, "Are you feeling any better?"

She attempted a smile but succeeded only in a grimace.

Yishai forced himself to sound upbeat. "It will be all right once we get you into a warm bed, you'll see."

Dinah allowed herself to be lifted off the wagon. To avoid another coughing fit, she whispered, "Hopefully..."

Yishai glanced at his son. "Stay with the wagon until I come for you."

"Yes, Dad."

The merchant supported his wife as they trudged to the stout door of the small, split-timber house.

The door to the common room opened and every head turned to see who had arrived. When one of the patrons spotted Yishai's peculiar clothing and the small cap on his head, he made a face and spat, "A Jew! What is their kind doing here?"

The rest of the guests followed his gaze and stared at the couple with hostile frowns.

Yishai and Dinah made their way to the bar with gritted teeth, trying to ignore the already familiar animosity. "I would like a room for the night."

The innkeeper glared at him and folded his arms in front of his chest. "We have a rule around here. We only welcome good Catholic folk. I don't want the Inquisitor paying me a visit, you understand."

One of the patrons said, "Yeah, Christ-killers are not welcome here."

"Why don't you go back to the Saracens? Your kind is helping them in the crusades. They'll surely welcome you."

Dinah gasped at their rejection and promptly coughed again.

With a pleading gaze at the innkeeper, Yishai said, "Please, kind sir. My wife is sick and needs to rest. I'll pay you double..."

The innkeeper's face turned into a grimace of hate. "You filthy Jew! How dare you bring the Black Death into my house? Get out of here before I rid us of this diseased wench for good." He retreated against the wall, clutching the corner of his sleeve over his mouth.

Some of the patrons jumped up, threatening the merchants' life with vocal outbursts. Others quickly crossed themselves superstitiously, covered their mouths with their hands, and scooted away from the couple.

Dinah looked at her husband. "Let us get out of here."

Yishai wanted to protest that she needed rest, but the villagers' faces convinced him that they were determined to inflict harm if they did not leave. He quickly led his wife out of the inn, back into the light rain of a dreary day.

Unsure what to do next, Yishai stood in front of the inn, supporting his shaking wife. "I'm sorry, honey..."

Dinah did not answer. She stared at the mud at their feet and cried silently.

Yishai averted his gaze. He had to do something before her fever would become life threatening, but what? This was the only inn in town.

When he glanced up, he saw his son looking at him from the wagon. Yishai shook his head to indicate that, once again, they had been denied room and board because of their religion.

Yo'ab nodded and let his shoulders slump with disappointment.

Dinah sobbed which led to another violent coughing bout.

A woman passing by on the other side of the narrow street stopped and looked at them from beneath a thick scarf. "She doesn't sound so good. You should get her to a healer."

Yishai was surprised that the woman had spoken to them. Before she had a chance to walk on, he asked, "Where can we find a healer, good woman?"

With a cautious smile, she said, "You are obviously not from around here." She pointed into the gray clouds, drifting in never-ceasing waves up the mountainside. "In the convent." She motioned to Dinah. "If anyone can help her, it will be the sisters up there. Good luck." She nodded a greeting before she hurried off and disappeared behind the next house.

Yishai looked at his wife to get her opinion, just in time to see her nearly faint in his arm. "Dinah!"

She quickly strengthened herself. "I'll be all right."

He shook his head. "Nonsense, I can plainly see you are not. I'm taking you to the convent."

Dinah looked at him with despair in her eyes. "If the village inn won't take us in, what makes you think a Catholic convent will be more accommodating?" She shook her head and slowly shuffled back to the wagon. "I'll just lay down for a little bit... I'll be fine."

Yishai followed her and helped her up. He secured the tailboard once more and walked around to the driver seat.

Yo'ab looked at his father's worried face and whispered, "She will be all right, won't she?"

He swallowed hard. "Only God knows, son..."

He gazed up at the ominous rainclouds. If he did nothing, he was afraid his wife would get much sicker. If he went to the convent, at least he could try to get help. Maybe, just maybe, he would find a sister with enough charity to give him medicine to bring Dinah's fever down.

Yishai gritted his teeth with determination before he freed the horses' reins and loosened the brakes. "By God's grace, we'll find a healer."

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Sister Michaela eased into the large hospital room, searching for the surgeon on duty this evening. When she spotted Sister Christiana, she quickened her steps.

The surgeon sat on the side of a patient's bed and checked her temperature with a ginger touch to her forehead.

"Sister Christiana?"

She looked up at Michaela. "More patients?"

She nodded. "Yes, but... uh... I don't know what to do. They are... um... I don't know if I should let them in."

Christiana rose from the bed and stood with a disapproving frown. "You left the sick standing at the door? In this weather?"

Michaela squirmed with discomfort. "Well... uh... yes. I..." She lowered her voice, "They are Jews. I didn't know what--"

"Jew or Christian, if they are sick, they need help. Let them in. There are free beds over there." She pointed where they should go.

Michaela nodded. "Yes, Sister Christiana." She ran off to do as she was told.

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Yishai carried Dinah in his arms and followed the young sister into the hospital. Yo'ab walked by his side, casting wary glances at everyone. They expected to be turned away as soon as the healer realized who they were.

Michaela arrived at one of the designated beds. "You can put her here and--"

"What is wrong with her? How long has she been like this?" Christiana approached from the other direction.

Yishai stood in front of the bed, still holding Dinah in his exhausted arms. "I beg for your mercy, Mistress Healer. I know we should not be here, but my wife... she is very ill..."

Christiana glanced at Michaela. "You should go back to watching the gate."

"Yes, sister." She hurried off.

The surgeon glanced at her patient before she raised her eyes to meet Yishai's. "God blessed Abraham and those who helped him. He cursed those who stood in his way. Surely, that goes for his descendants as well." With a warm smile, she added, "Now come. I can't examine your wife while you are holding her. Besides, I suppose your arms will get tired sooner or later."

Yishai stared at her with surprise before he glanced at his son and both breathed a sigh of relief. He deposited Dinah's limp body on the narrow bed in front of him.

Christiana sat on the edge of the bed to lift her patient's eyelids and check her pulse.

Yishai stood by the foot of the bed and wrung his hands. Only then did he remember the sister's questions. "Dinah... uh... she has been running a fever for a couple of days now... and that nasty cough. I guess the cold, wet weather the last few days didn't help much... We are merchants, you know... travel in a wagon. It's drafty on days like this. She sleeps a lot. My son said she has also been staring at nothing... Today has been the worst day yet... On our way up here..." Yishai swallowed hard. "She isn't going to die, is she?"

Christiana looked up at him and smiled. "I don't think we should give up so easily. I have yet to examine her. Please, help me by taking her coat off and loosen her dress so I can listen to her lungs."

He nodded and quickly sat on the other edge of the bed to help as requested. When Dinah's chest was uncovered enough, Christiana bent down to listen to the beating of her heart and the breathing of her lungs.

The unexpected touch awoke Dinah and she startled. "Oh, my..." Immediately, she had another coughing fit.

The sister waited until she quieted down. "I'm glad to see you awake, Dinah. How do you feel?"

Her haunted eyes darted around the hospital room before they came to rest on the friendly face of the sister. "Not so good... I have a fever and this cough... Besides that, I am so tired... And my head hurts..." She flashed Yishai an apologetic smile.

Christiana nodded. "Well, the flu will do that to you. I think if we can get rid of this fever and get you enough rest, you can be well again. Let me fetch some medicine that will bring your temperature down and help you sleep. It will be bitter, but well worth it." She rose from the bed and smiled at them.

Dinah caught her hand and whispered, "Thank you so much."

Yishai rose from the bed. "Yes, thank you, Mistress Healer. We thought... the people in the village were not so kind to us."

"The villagers' charity leaves something to be desired on occasion. In this house, we are dedicated to easing suffering and binding wounds, but now excuse me for a moment. I have to bring you the medicine." She flashed another quick smile before she turned and left to the faint sound of her habit brushing against the stone floor tiles.

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Yishai watched the sister return. She deposited a cup on the nightstand before she sat at her patient's bedside. "Here is the medicine." She handed her a small glass vial. "You might want to drink it quickly, so you don't taste it. I also brought some sweetened tea, to wash it down, and to keep you hydrated. I would like you to finish the cup before you go to sleep. It will aid in the healing."

With a tired smile, Dinah said, "I will. Thank you so much." She quickly emptied the vial and made a face at the disgusting taste. She gladly received the cup the sister held ready for her.

Christiana rose and walked over to Yo'ab, who sat unobtrusively on the next bed. "Now, let me have a look at you, young man."

Yo'ab froze, his eyes riveted to the floor.

Yishai looked at his son with surprise.

Christiana knelt before the bed to be face-to-face with Yo'ab. She looked into his eyes and lifted her hand to check the temperature of his forehead. When she was finished, she smiled. "You've been taking care of your mother, haven't you?"

Yo'ab nodded.

"That is very kind of you. Unfortunately, the flu is contagious, so you've probably caught what your mother has."

Yishai gasped with shock.

She turned to look at him. "Don't worry. He only has a slight temperature and otherwise, he looks to be in good condition. I will bring another vial of medicine for him and he will have to climb into a bed as well." She rose and smiled before she left.

Yishai stood between both beds and watched his son climb under the covers. He was not sure whom to be worried about more, his wife or his son.

Christiana returned and gave Yo'ab his medicine and tea. She turned to ensure that Dinah was already asleep, with her teacup empty.

Yishai followed her movements. When she looked at him, he hoped his smile conveyed gratitude that she had not turned them away, not the worry for his family.

Christiana said, "They will be asleep soon enough, Master Merchant."

With a distracted nod, he said, "Yes, I know... and thank you. Please, my name is Yishai."

She smiled. "It is nice to meet you, Yishai. If you would, please come with me."

He glanced at the two beds before he looked at her again. He tried to keep his hands from wringing. Where did she want him to go? What was she going to do?

She laughed. "You entrust the health of your family into my hands but you don't trust me any further than that?"

Yishai averted his gaze and mumbled. "Sorry, I didn't mean--"

She waved for him to follow her as she turned and walked to the rear of the hospital.

He looked back at his wife and son one last time before he followed the sister with hesitant steps.

She walked through a stout door, then along a hallway until she reached another door. She waited for him to catch up before she opened it and motioned for him to walk in ahead of her.

He swallowed with apprehension before he did as he was bidden. He stepped over the threshold and froze into place immediately, his eyes big. "I can't... This is a church. I'm not allowed--"

"Nonsense. It is holy ground, consecrated to the God we both serve. Pretend it is King Solomon's temple in Jerusalem if that makes you feel more at ease." She smiled before she turned to walk on. "It is Friday and I believe the sun is about to set. Do your commandments not compel you to prepare for the Sabbath?"

Yishai stared at her in shock. How did she know of Jewish customs? She was a Christian nun. Was it really Friday? In his worry over Dinah, he had lost track of time.

Before he could think of a response, she continued, "Come. I have a good, out-of-the-way place in mind where you can worship uninterrupted."

When she walked off, Yishai was quick to follow her. "Why... I mean... uh... Why would you do this for me? If an inquisitor finds out about this..."

Christiana laughed. "Currently, there are no church inquisitors staying at our convent, and I am not about to alert them."

She walked along the aisle of the church, only illuminated by flickering candles. The strengthening rain drummed a steady beat against the tall, stained-glass windows, now darkened by the approaching night. She stopped by a side chapel and motioned for him to follow her.

When Yishai dared to enter, he found her looking at an altar depicting Jesus, surrounded by a few lambs. She turned to him and smiled. "I know this is a picture of our Lord, but you could pretend that it is David, keeping his flocks, before Samuel anointed him King of Israel."

He glanced briefly at the altar before staring at the sister, baffled by the nonchalant tone she used to put him at ease.

Christiana shrugged. "I'm sorry, but I am not very familiar with your customs. Do you need anything to celebrate the Sabbath? The scriptures don't mention too many details, as I recall."

Finally, Yishai found his voice again. "Well... uh... two candles, some wine and bread, if you can spare it without getting your house into trouble."

Christiana nodded as if she was a servant taking an order for food. "Wait here, I will be right back." She turned to leave before she stopped and added, "And don't worry, the next Mass is not for a little while. You have time to relax."

He followed her with his eyes as she left, wondering if he was dreaming, for surely, this would not really happen, would it?

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Yishai rose from the pew when the sister returned and set a tray on the edge of the altar. She smiled. "I will give you some privacy, but don't worry, before the sisters return for the night Mass, I will come back to warn you."

When she turned to leave the chapel, he stood in her way. "Please, Mistress Healer, I don't want to be caught alone performing strange rituals in your church. If you're not missed in the hospital, would you mind staying?"

Christiana raised an eyebrow with surprise. "I don't mind staying, if I am not too distracting."

He smiled with relief and motioned for her to stand next to him by the altar. He took the two candles and set them into the simple stands she had brought. He picked up a sliver of wood that was used to transfer the flame from one candle to another. Before he touched it to the lamp of presence however, he hesitated.

She glanced at him. "Are you all right?"

He nodded. "Yes, sorry. Usually the lighting of the candles... it is my wife's part of the ceremony."

"Well, we should really let her rest, but if you'd show me what to do, I can stand in for her."

Yishai gasped. "Are you not afraid that you might commit a mortal sin?"

She chuckled. "No, of course not. Your people are commanded to worship and reverence God as much as we are. The mere fact that the Jews still exist after centuries of being scattered to the winds tells me that He preserves you because you do follow His commandments." She smiled. "So, what do I do?"

He shook off his amazement at the stark difference of attitude toward his people between the sister and the villagers. "First light the candles, please."

She held the wooden sliver into the flame to ignite it before she lit both wicks.

"Now wave your hands over the flames like this three times..." He waited until she had done so before he continued, "Now cover your eyes and then I say the blessing, because it is in Hebrew."

Christiana did so and waited for him to speak.

Yishai breathed deeply before he haltingly recited the familiar phrase. "Barukh atah..."

When he paused, she repeated his words. "Baruch ata..."

He removed the hands over his eyes to stare at her with astonishment. When he saw that she was still standing with her eyes covered, waiting for what was next, he continued, "...Adonai Eloheinu..."

She tried to copy his every inflection. "...Adonai Eloheinu..."

"...Melekh ha'olam..."

She continued to repeat every word.

When Yishai finished the sentence, he said, "You can uncover your eyes now."

Christiana looked at him. "May I ask what I said? It sounded very beautiful."

"Of course. We said, 'Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the Shabbat candles.'"

She sighed. "I wish I could remember that five minutes from now. It must be such an honor to be able to speak God's own language. But sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt."

He flashed a quick smile. "Oh, not at all. Next, I would have blessed my son, but since he is not here either..." His voice failed him and he was trying hard to hide his emotions.

"I'm sure he'll be fine. Why don't you pray over him instead?"

Yishai thought for a moment before he nodded. "Oh, Adonai Eloheinu... I ask most humbly that You bless this sister that she may heal my wife and my son--"

Christiana shook her head. "Master Yishai, I don't have the power to heal in me any more than any earthly person. When I treat my patients, I draw on the healing power of the Most High and I allow His love to flow through me."

He stared at her with confusion. What did that mean?

The sister closed her eyes and raised her right hand. "Father, I ask of You to heal Dinah and her son completely and entirely. Let Your healing anointing flow through every part of their body so that they may be whole and entire, wanting nothing. Lord, they are the seed of Abraham and You have promised that You are the God who heals them and us. Father, I ask for their healing in Jesus' name. Amen." She lowered her hand and opened her eyes. "They will be fine. Have faith in the God who brought your people out of Egypt with signs and wonders. A little flu is no problem for the One, Who parted an ocean to rescue His people." She smiled. "Now I think you should continue with the ceremony before the night's Mass will start."

Yishai had trouble averting his stare. He shook himself and resumed reciting the rest of the prescribed prayers. He broke the bread in half and held out a piece of it for her. "Usually we share a meal."

She took it and ate her portion while he did the same.

For the sake of time, he spoke the rest of the prayers quickly.

"Thank you, Mistress Healer. I did not expect to find a Christian that not only cared for my wife but also showed respect for our people. I pray that God will not forget your kindness."

"It was my pleasure. I wish that Christians were more willing to listen to the wisdom your people undoubtedly have about our God. We might learn much more than we realize. Be blessed, Yishai..." As she was still speaking, they heard the prayer bells' clear sound pierce the low drum of the rain outside.

Christiana blew out the candles and loaded everything back onto the tray. "Return to the hospital. You can sleep in one of the free beds next to your family tonight. I will look in on you a little while later." She flashed an encouraging smile before she made her way out of the chapel.

Yishai was quick to follow her and walk by her side. When they had almost reached the door to the hallway, one of the sisters entering for Mass noticed them. "Sister Christiana?"

In reply, she held up the tray and said, "Communion over healing."

The other sister nodded and continued towards the choir.

Only after they had stepped through the door into the hallway did Yishai dare to breathe again.

Christiana smiled. "Good night."

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As the rising sun cast a warming glow through the windows of the hospital, Yishai awoke and got up quickly. He straightened his clothes and the sheets on the bed he had used. He went to his wife's bed and knelt by her side. He was surprised to find Dinah awake and studying the unadorned vaulting of the high ceiling. "You are up? How do you feel?"

Dinah smiled. "Still a little tired, but much better." She turned her head to look at him. "That sister was very kind to us. You should make a donation to the convent, you know, to say thank you."

Yishai nodded, thinking of the kindness the sister had shown him his wife knew nothing of. "I think it should be a big donation. They take in anybody, it seems."

Dinah replied, "Remember though that we need some of the money to buy wares in Asturia. The value of what we have loaded right now won't cover the entire price."

Yishai eyes darted to the rest of the big room. "I was thinking we should give them the book."

Dinah's eyes became big. "You have to be very sure about this. If their church superiors find out..."

"I know, honey, but it is just as dangerous driving around the countryside with it. Besides, they heal the sick, who better to appreciate it."

She whispered, "All I ask is that you are sure."

Yishai thought only for a moment. "I am sure."

Dinah winked at him. "Then do it."

They smiled at each other in agreement until she looked at the bed next to hers. "How is Yo'ab?"

Yishai shrugged. "I have not checked on him yet, but he is snoring a little, so I didn't want to wake him. He is fine, I'm sure."

Dinah leaned back into her pillows. "Then I think I should take another nap. Maybe you can find some breakfast for later. I am suddenly very hungry."

He was relieved she was feeling so much better. "I'll see what I can do."

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Yishai approached one of the sisters and asked, "Excuse me, Mistress. I am looking for the sister who was on duty last night."

She frowned. "Sister Christiana is not on duty today. If you need something, I can help you as well."

He felt his face heating. "Well... uh... it is... she was... I would like to say thank you in person, if I may."

The older sister smiled. "No thanks are necessary. We do our duty as unto the Lord. She knows you appreciate her help."

"If it is permitted, I would like to give her something..."

The sister glanced at several women that stood at the other end of the large room and rolled up long bandages. "If you really feel so compelled, ask one of the novices if they have a minute to find Christiana."

Yishai followed her gaze and nodded. "Thank you, Mistress Healer."

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Christiana walked along the row of beds and found Dinah and Yo'ab sleeping peacefully. Yishai sat on a hard chair between both beds, his head lolling in slumber as well. The sister smiled and turned to sneak away.

As if her presence had stirred him, Yishai awoke with a start. When he looked up, she was already leaving. "Mistress Healer!" He jumped to his feet. Smoothing his tunic, he smiled at her sheepishly. "Thank you for coming. I must have dozed off."

She smiled. "What can I do for you? Do the other sisters not care for them adequately?"

Yishai shook his head. "No, no, it is not that. Everyone is very nice and Dinah and Yo'ab are already feeling much better."

"Then what is the matter?"

Yishai scanned the room and lowered his voice. "You were so gracious... Dinah and I... we decided to give you a gift... or make a donation, if you will."

She shook her head. "Nothing is necessary, Master Yishai. That your family is feeling better is all the thanks I desire. The Lord will reward me later, if He so pleases."

He nodded. "Yes, I understand, but... um... my 'gift' is not entirely selfless." He looked around once more. "Can we go somewhere we can't be overheard?"

Christiana looked at him with curiosity before she nodded and motioned for him to follow her. "Let us go to the refectory then. Nobody should be sitting at meal this time of day."

When they arrived at the large room lined with tables and benches, Christiana ensured that nobody was within before she closed the door behind them. "Now tell me, Master Yishai, what mysterious gift do you wish to bestow on us?"

The merchant barely met her gaze before he spoke. "I have a book in my possession..." He wrung his hands with nervous energy and swallowed hard. "The kindness you showed us... I think you will understand..." He cleared his dry throat. "The book is outlawed... We found it on our trade route. A man was robbed and killed. The thieves thought the book was useless to them, so they tossed it aside." He looked up at her, "The book is about the human body. I think you might appreciate it, if you are given to reading and study."

Christiana frowned with suspicion. "Outlawed by whom, and why?"

Yishai flashed a nervous smile. "Well... uh... the Church, the Saracens... and my own people, too, outside of the Promised Land, that is."

"So for you to carry it is dangerous as well. You'd rather have us take it then? Of course, why is there any less danger to us if we take it?"

Yishai wrung his hands again. "Sorry, Mistress Healer, I don't mean to heap my problems on you. I just thought the book... it could be useful to learn more about healing... and it is valuable, very valuable."

She thought for a moment. "I cannot make such a decision for my fellow sisters. If what you say is true, you are endangering our house. Do you have this book in your possession right now?"

"I can get it from my wagon within the hour."

Christiana nodded at the door. "When you leave this room, there is a staircase to your right. If you still want to give it to us, get the book and meet me in the room at the head of the stairs."

Yishai nodded. "I will." He turned and hurried from the refectory.

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Christiana reached the office of the Mother Superior and knocked. When nobody answered, she walked down the narrow corridor.

"Christiana?" A sister leaned from her chair by a writing desk to be able to peek out of the open door.

"Hey, Jutta. Is the Mother coming back soon?"

The other sister nodded. "Yes, she said right after prayers."

Christiana smiled. "I'll be waiting for her then. I have something I need her to decide."

Jutta replied, "I'll tell her if I see her before you do."

Christiana entered the Mother's office and after a few minutes, she found herself strolling from one end of the room to the other, thinking on Yishai's words and his dangerous gift.

"Christiana? You here? On your day to study the Scriptures?" The Mother stood by the door and frowned.

Christiana smiled. "Yes, Mother. I was called away to one of my patients."

The abbess raised an eyebrow. "Nothing serious I hope?"

"No. He wants to give a donation, but the nature of this gift requires your permission."

At the Mother's skeptical gaze, she added, "I'd rather let him tell it."

The abbess nodded and sat behind her desk. "I presume we are waiting for him? Why don't you sit in the meantime?" She bowed her head over the papers on her desk.

After some time, Yishai entered with a wrapped package under his arm. At the sight of the older nun, he gasped and froze by the door.

Christiana rose and smiled. "This is the Mother Superior of this order. I need to ask her permission to receive your gift. Please, tell her what it is and how you came to it." She made an inviting gesture toward the abbess.

Yishai swallowed hard. "On my trade route, I came across one of my people, lying murdered in a ditch. The highwaymen had taken his money, and clothes, but they threw this aside." He lifted up his package to indicate what he meant. "To do the decent thing, I buried him and took the rest of his possessions to myself, to return them to his family if I ever found out who they were. Later that evening, I opened the book and read it. Only then did I know that perhaps I should have left it lying on side of the road."

The Mother looked at him with curiosity. "What kind of book is it?"

Yishai shook his head. "I'd rather show you." He laid his package on one of the chairs and unwrapped it from its protective covering. When it was free, he opened the book to a random page and set it on the Mother's desk. "It seems to treat on the subject of anatomy and the healing of various diseases."

The abbess turned a few pages and studied the intricate illustrations of body parts. She looked up at him. "I don't think anybody in this convent can read this language. What is it?"

He pointed to the page. "This is Hebrew, the language of my people, and this is Arabic, the language of the Saracens."

The Mother sat back in her chair, trying to mask a surprised gasp with her hand. "I can see where that might be frowned upon by the Church."

He nodded. "If you'll allow me, I'll translate the first page for you, maybe then you will understand fully." He smiled apologetically before he took up the book again to turn it to its beginning.

"El'azar ben Yoram ben Dawid, by YHVH's grace, first physician at the Aleppo School of Medicine.

To my students, and all those using this book after I have gone to rest with my fathers. Greetings.

Let it be known that the God of Abraham, of Yitshaq, and of Ya'aqob is pleased with your decision to learn from the best physicians in this world to ease the suffering of the sick and injured. May your studies be blessed and your understanding fruitful.

Yet also heed this warning. This book of instruction exist only because of the gracious indulgence of His Majesty al-Malik al-Adil Sayf al-Din Abu-Bakr ibn Ayyub, may he rest in peace with his fathers. In order to obtain the permission for the sons of Israel to study at His Majesty's schools, renowned among the Muslims for their great healing wisdom, I have given my solemn oath that this book will not be translated from either Hebrew or Arabic into the tongues of the crusading infidels, nor will it be allowed to be transported to their lands. I charge my pupils

to adhere to the good faith of your hosts and not violate these instructions. May YHVH's blessing be upon you."

Yishai looked up at his apt listeners. "Under these finely penned instructions, there is another note, written more quickly, it seems." He looked at the book once more.

"Sa'ad al-Dawla, court physician, and benefactor of the distinguished Aleppo School of Medicine hereby grants special permission to Ephraim ibn Yusuf al-Andaluz to carry this untranslated copy of our teaching manual back to his homeland for personal use in his own medical practice only."

Yishai gingerly closed the book's cover.

The abbess looked at him in silence for a long while. "You are sure that you'll want to part with such a treasure?"

He nodded. "Yes, quite sure. The Asturian Inquisitors are... renowned for their cruelty toward Jews in general, and, to be sure, those carrying something like this in particular." He gestured at the book. "I have no use for it, nor can I sell it, not without risking my head, that is."

The Mother nodded. "Yet it is useless to us as well. Neither one of us is learned in Hebrew or the Saracens' tongue. I don't think staring at the illustrations will do much good without the text."

"I could help with that if you don't mind..." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out another, smaller book. "This is a Hebrew dictionary. Those of us who need help with their scripture reading carry them around with us. It has a few explanations in the front before the words start." He smiled. "I know it is a lot to ask your house to take on such a risk, for the small gain of having to decipher this book with the help of another tedious read, but I have not much else to give as thanks for your gracious help."

Christiana looked at the Mother, who was still contemplating his words. "We should at least try to translate it. It is rumored that the Muslims know so much more about medicine than we do. Some claim that to be one of the reasons we were beaten so badly in the Holy Land."

The Mother nodded in thought before she glanced at her. "Would you be willing to spend hours in study to learn its secrets?"

"I would, Mother."

The abbess focused on Yishai. "I will have your solemn oath, sworn to your God, that you will tell no one about this. Nobody is to know that we have such a book, and it even exists outside of the Holy Land. Do I have your promise?"

"As Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam is my witness, I swear I will not reveal your secret, Mistress Healer." Yishai spoke with a grave voice.

The Mother nodded. "Then I am satisfied. Tia, take the books and lock them away. You are to cut your time in the hospital in half to study this manual as thoroughly as you can and make transcripts for the rest of us." She smiled before she added, "No offense to the honored physician that wrote the book and made the admonition, but we swore no such oath to refrain from translating it into the tongue of the 'infidels.'"

Christiana grinned. "As you wish, Mother."

The abbess looked at Yishai. "Thank you. If we are able to make sense of it, it might save many lives. Your gift is very much appreciated. May you leave in peace, with your health fully restored."

Yishai bowed before her with a relieved smile. “You are welcome, Mistress Healer, and thank you again.” He also bowed to Christiana before he hurried from the office.

The Mother looked at her with an indulging smile. “Oh, go on. I know you are eager to start on it.”