

COLOGNE, JANUARY 1665

Writhing in labour, the pregnant woman screams. Sweat beads her brow. In the flickering candlelight her contorted face bears a strong resemblance to the icon which hangs above the curtained bed: Saint Ursula, one of Cologne's many saints, martyred for her virginity. 'Breathe deeply.'

The midwife, Ruth bas Elazar Saul, daughter of the chief rabbi of Deutz, runs her fingers over the taut womb, her hands coated with a slippery ointment made of lily oil, birthwort and saffron.

'Breathe, it will help ease the pain,' she instructs. A strand of hair falls from under her twin-peaked damask cap, the telltale bonnet of the Jewess. The two points etch a silhouette of horns against the shadowy wall as she bends to examine the position of the baby.

Slipping her fingers into the groaning woman, the midwife feels how much the cervix has dilated. Her assistant, Miriam, a homely fifteen year old, wipes the patient's brow and glances anxiously at Ruth. The woman has been labouring for over twenty hours and the baby should have descended by now. Only too aware of the implications for a Jewish midwife should the birthing of a wealthy Catholic patient go wrong, Miriam discreetly nods towards the birthing hooks: three curved steel instruments by the hearth, sinister in the firelight. Used as a last resort, they are for looping around the head of the baby to force its emergence. 'No, Miriam, not yet,' Ruth answers the silent query. The young woman twists suddenly. The purple veins of her huge belly strain as she grasps the bedposts behind her head. Beneath the greasy skin Ruth traces the geography of the baby, her long fingers searching for the bulge of the head, the tiny knots of the spine and the bones of the feet. Cupping her hands over the vast orb she locates the buttocks, which are pointing towards the cervix. Massaging gently, she tries to manipulate the child so that it will turn, but stubbornly it remains in position.

'Breech,' Ruth murmurs softly to Miriam, whose eyes widen in alarm. The midwife steps away from her patient and opens a leather satchel. Curiously Oriental in design, it has a single letter in Hebrew embossed on the front. With her back turned deliberately away from the bed Ruth lifts out a smoky glass jar filled with a greenish-grey powder. Crouching, she carefully begins to pour the ashes onto the floor, creating a wide circle which encompasses the writhing woman and the assistant. As she sprinkles with her left hand, she chants the Hebrew names of the three angels — Snwy, Snsnwy and Smnglf — under her breath.

Despite Ruth's concentration, a fluttering panic begins to rise up in her. It is Lilith, she thinks, who is creeping into her fears. Lilith: the demon that strangles newborns and takes the lives of labouring mothers. The secret embodiment of all her uncertainties, all her desires; the nebulous phantom who has haunted her since she was a young girl and witnessed her own mother perish in childbirth. Ruth imagines she feels the air shift above her; she can almost sense the invisible presence of the fiend, almost smell the sulphurous breath drifting over her left shoulder.

This is not good reason, the midwife reminds herself, and summons the cold clarity of her medical training to expel the dread that is squeezing up through her muscles. But the image of the demon persists: the undulating seductress seems to be staring at her from every corner of the dark wood-panelled room, her misty outline hovering at the edge of Ruth's vision. From outside comes the eerie cry of a screech owl. Looming through the grey dawn its white wide-eyed face is suddenly at the window as it thuds blindly into the glass. It is Lilith's totem, the creature she transforms into to suckle at the breasts of young children or the dugs of goats. Crouching by the bed Miriam gasps in fear, her hand reaching up for the Magen David lying hidden beneath her robe. Ruth, holding down her terror, doggedly continues the hex against the demon.

A second later a long shadow flits suddenly across the ceiling. Shrieking, the labouring woman curls up in agony. Miriam fights to pin down her resistant limbs. Determined, Ruth grits her teeth and completes the circle, her low mantra growing in volume. Soft grey ash meets soft grey ash as the circle of protection is

sealed. Sitting back on her haunches, the midwife breathes a sigh of relief. She has taken all possible precautions now, spiritual as well as medical. She stands and rinses her hands in the washbasin, then steps out to the small chamber that leads off the bedroom. Meister Franz Brassant rises to his feet. A large man in his early fifties, he is at least twenty-five years older than his wife, nevertheless he wears the fashionable clothes of a younger man: an embroidered velvet waistcoat over a silk undershirt, breeches edged in lace; the uniform of an affluent burger. Brassant sits on the town council, the Gaffeln, and is connected to the four most powerful merchant families of Cologne.

'How is she?' An odour of stale sweat and fear rises from his clothes, still damp from his earlier rush home through the rain.

Knowing there is no time for protocol Ruth decides to trust in the intelligence of the man standing before her. Fastening her gaze to his she pauses for a moment, reading the intensity of the flickering trepidation in his eyes.

'I will have to cut,' she answers bluntly.

Shocked, Meister Brassant breathes in deeply, his hands blindly searching for his wife's coral and silver rosary which he has strung around his thick neck. 'It is not my custom to allow a Jewess to touch my wife, or even to be permitted into my abode, but they say you are the best in the province.'

'I am a trained midwife not a miracle-worker.'

'To not believe in miracles is to blaspheme.'

'I believe in *scientia nova*, Meister Brassant. Knowledge and nature. To me, these are the proven properties.'

'Prayer and faith are the domain of man. All men.'

'We are wasting time. If the matrix is not peeled back, the child will suffocate and your wife will perish.' Brassant stares at the small, dark and strangely compelling figure standing before him. This is not a breed of woman he has met before and yet he is expected to surrender the life of his young wife and child to her. His eyes come to rest on a gold crescent pinned at Ruth's neck — the mark of Spain. She must have Sephardic blood in her. Immediately his demeanour softens: he has traded with the Spanish Jews of Amsterdam and trusts them.

'You have my permission. But if she or the child dies, you die with them.'

Ruth hardly pauses, her only concern for the patient she attends. She nods and, with a detachment that implies no servitude, curtsies.

'I will pray anyway,' Brassant adds as the midwife steps back through the darkened doorway. Just then the labouring woman cries out. Shuddering, the gold merchant crosses himself and kisses the rosary. He has already lost two wives and four children and he dreads the loss of another. Sinking to his knees he prepares himself for a desperate bargain with God. After all, wasn't it only last month that he'd paid a hundred Reichstaler for his sins, as much as he hates donating anything to Archbishop Maximilian Heinrich, whom he — like most of his fellow burghers — regards as an untrustworthy political opponent rather than a spiritual guide. Times are complicated indeed, Brassant thinks, when you have to rely on a Jewish witch to save your wife and a trumped-up French sympathiser in a gilded vestment for redemption. The copper surgical knife, fashioned by Ruth herself, floats in a cauldron of boiling water slung over the small fire. There is a strong smell of burning cloves. Meister Brassant's personal medic has insisted on smoking the small bedchamber, holding fast to the

Christian superstition that the aroma will ward off evil spirits who could steal the soul of the child as it enters the worldly domain. The midwife, having studied medicine in Amsterdam, a city renowned for its innovation in the new science, has her doubts. But her old mentor, Dirk Kerckrinck, has recently sent her a thesis suggesting that disease may be carried by the invisible aether that fills the air. Because of this hypothesis she tolerates the quack's bunches of smouldering herbs that make the air nearly unbreathable. Besides, now that she has called on the old ways as a precaution, it would be a hypocrisy not to allow the medic his quirks.

Stepping into the circle of ashes Ruth again feels between the woman's thighs. The baby has dropped further and the patient's vulva is stretched paper-thin. If she does not cut, the woman will tear. Yet she will never survive the baby emerging buttocks first.

Ruth pauses. She has attended a breech birth like this before, in one of Amsterdam's dockside slums with Dirk Kerckrinck. But then the patient was an unmarried housemaid, not the wife of a wealthy burgher. And while Kerckrinck, son of a nobleman from Hamburg, could afford an accident, for Ruth a mistake now means an instant death sentence.

The midwife recalls how Kerckrinck, having failed to turn the baby from the outside, decided to turn it from within. An audacious move for a student with only two years' training. Ruth, dubious, had argued against it while both of them pored over Galen's definitive anatomy manual, *De usu partium*. Ignoring her qualms, the young medical student had cut the skin of the vulva then slipped enough of his fingers inside to manipulate the unborn child while she assisted from outside the womb. Both the maid and her child lived. In acknowledgment of its miraculous survival, Kerckrinck had christened the baby Moses.

Abigail Brassant groans again, pleading with Ruth to end her agony. Even in extreme pain the young woman radiates a luminosity which reminds Ruth of the Nordic princesses described in Herodotus' *History*. The young girl must have been a prize for the old man waiting anxiously in the next room. Chaucer would

have called it the marriage of January and May: a transaction in which romantic love is traded for security. The thought depresses her. For all her fierce practicality and intellectual rigour, she has not been able to exorcise the tantalising possibility of the existence of a soulmate: a man who would match her in both ideals and vision. Rather than face the inevitable disappointment she believes an arranged marriage would bring, Ruth has secretly wedded herself to a vow of celibacy.

She reaches for a crystal bottle containing an elixir of pure alcohol mixed with thorn apple and tinctured with laburnum, a concoction she has invented herself. She pours a few drops onto a handkerchief and places it over the young woman's nose and mouth. A second later Abigail Brassant calms. With pupils large and dilated she stares up at the fresco painted on the ceiling while Miriam supports her weight. A fresco which depicts the honourable Meister Franz Brassant as a rather overweight and decrepit Perseus slaying the gorgon, the midwife notes wryly.

Remembering the diagram she studied in Soranus' book on midwifery, Ruth takes up the scalpel and carefully makes one diagonal cut at the side of the vagina to open the vulva further. Opiated, her patient barely flinches as blood splashes her white thighs.

Midwife and assistant work together until finally the purple pasty curve of the head appears, pushing the vaginal lips out until they are almost transparent. As the baby begins to emerge Ruth realises that the pulsating birth cord is wrapped around its neck.

Knowing that the child's death means their own, Miriam stifles a scream with her fist. But Ruth, emotionless, picks up two small copper pegs. She manipulates the slippery head, now half-hanging from the groaning woman, until she can reach the umbilical cord. Clamping it in two places, she deftly cuts the fleshy lifeline and pulls it clear from the neck. Then, carefully, she pushes her fingers inside and eases the child's passage so that one shoulder comes clear of the vagina then the other.

'Push,' Ruth urges the young woman who is now delirious. The woman makes one last effort and the rest of the baby shoots out into the midwife's hands.

The baby lies in her grasp, his skin coated in white pungent vernix, his genitals swollen and bulbous, his face blue, lifeless.

Covering the baby's nose and mouth with her mouth, Ruth sucks the viscous fluids clear from the child's airways then spits them into a bowl. Skilfully she swings the baby upside down, slaps it on the bottom.

Silence. Not even a whimper from the small body dangling lifelessly from her clenched hands. Abigail Brassant moans, her eyes half-open. Convinced they are both doomed Miriam falls to her knees.

Ignoring the young woman's hysterics, Ruth slaps the baby again. This time a thin miaow sounds and a rosy hue floods the child, transforming the mauve flesh to pink. Smiling for the first time in hours, the midwife holds up the baby as it coughs then begins bawling.

'It is a boy,' she tells Meister Brassant who has appeared in the doorway. 'And he is healthy.' The merchant rushes over and gathers the child into his arms, age abruptly etching his face. Then, to Ruth's surprise, he weeps with relief. Suddenly exhausted, she sinks to the ground.

The town crier, a corpulent Westphalian who lost his left eye in the Thirty Years' War, steps delicately over the stream of sewage running alongside the wet cobblestones. Curling his fat fingers firmly around the handle of a large brass horn he sounds in five o'clock morning-tide. Nothing stirs except for a large pig snuffling at a pile of icy turnip peelings and old cabbage leaves thrown against

the wall of a beer hall. The town crier yawns and, stretching his stiff bones, squints up at Meister Brassant's windows. There is a light shining in the mistress's bedroom and the maid has hung a garland of winter poppies over the balcony. A child has been born, a male child. The town crier smiles; with luck he will get a jug of mulled wine and a kiss if he knocks at the back gate, maybe even a little more. Whistling, he kicks aside the cabbage leaves and makes his way across the narrow lane.

While the town crier stands at the wooden shutters waiting for the maid to respond to his tapping, Ruth, her face concealed by a large hood, steps out of the servants' quarters further down the lane followed by Miriam clutching a covered basket full of instruments of midwifery. The grey of their cloaks blends perfectly with the muted hues of the high rickety houses, precarious towers of wooden beams and plaster which seem to reach out to one another across the passageway, almost blotting out the sky overhead. The two women, painfully aware of being trespassers, fear prickling their scalps, glide across the street towards a waiting cart. Its outline is barely discernible through the hovering mist which has lingered on through the night. Both women move silently with the practice of a race which, over centuries, has learnt to survive by making itself invisible. Ruth takes the basket and hoists it onto the cart, then pulls herself up to sit shivering on the wooden seat while Miriam climbs in beside her.

The coachman makes a clicking sound and the huge draughthorse rolls its flanks mournfully into action. As the town crier turns at the sound of hooves the cart is already disappearing into the fog.

The port master, surly and pockmarked, takes the five Reichstaler bribe from the coachman and spits into the gutter. For Jews he is prepared to turn a blind eye, but he is not willing to condemn his soul to eternal damnation. The decree is that no Jew shall stay overnight in the Holy Free Imperial Catholic city of Cologne, but if the rich want the Hebrew doctors to visit them that's their business. Still, if anyone should care to ask the port master, he would care to tell — for a price.

Bleary-eyed with sleep he watches the cart drive through the huge wooden gates. The hooded woman is young and haunting with her chiselled profile and white skin, her green eyes visible below her cowl. The port master knows who she is: the witch from Deutz, the best midwife in the Rhineland. He beckons his son over and picks up a wooden stick. Crouching, he draws the sign of the cross and two wavy lines beneath it in the mud — a hex to ward off the sorceress's evil spirit. Pointing to the cart as it winds down towards the harbour, he tells the boy that he's heard the woman uses Jewish magic, the kabbala, to protect her own and can draw out spirits from the sick as well as create a golem, a slavegiant made from the river clay itself.

'They say that on the Passover she sacrifices young boys then drinks their blood. Meister Brassant must have been desperate to employ such a woman,' he whispers, checking over his shoulder for spies.

Confused, the pimply-faced adolescent thinks of how he lusted for the woman the moment he saw her. Could that be her magic too? With one hand the boy pushes down his erection, crossing himself with the other in case she has cursed him.

Ruth leans back in the cart. Behind them the hollow thud of the huge wooden gates sounds out; she does not care to turn around.

There are many in Deutz who would consider it an honour to enter the walled bastion; Ruth is not among them. The so-called free city with its churches and holy relics is an irresistible lodestone for the desperate pilgrims who pour through its gates every day seeking redemption, hoping for a miracle as they claw over each other to gaze at the crumbling bones of the three Magi. But Cologne seems quaint to Ruth after five years in Amsterdam, a city bursting with enlightenment. She misses the exhilaration of debate, the fierce intellectual curiosity that had no fear, the celebration of a Republic, of a democracy which would free all those young spirits after thirty years of war. The energy of revolution. Of change! Here, in this medieval stronghold, all is backward-looking. Trapped in the Middle Ages, Cologne still rests on its former glory as a

trading power. If the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were the glorious mercantile years of Cologne, the seventeenth century belongs to Holland. The Dutch religious tolerance, born out of a commercial pragmatism, serves the fledgling Republic well. The Netherlands has become the new axis for philosophy as well as medical and scientific advances. A magnet for all who think beyond the narrow confines of a world where church and state are one and the sun still flies around the earth. The wooden docks and the sailing ships beyond come into view. As the mist clears the Rhine glistens under the moonlight. On the right are moored the great seagoing vessels of Holland, Spain, France, even England. On the left the smaller German river boats wait to take the cargo upstream to Münster, Bremen, Hamburg and beyond. This constant exchange of cargo is how the city has always made its money, exploiting its strategic position on one of the main trading routes of the Middle Ages. The glorious Rhine. What must it have been like a hundred years before? A bustling harbour full of activity and intrigue. Now there is industry but life is harder, the port quieter. The discovery of the great territory which lies beyond the European horizon — the East Indies, China and the Americas — is destroying custom. These new trading routes have eclipsed the old paths and Cologne, starved of commerce, suffers.

Ruth counts ten oceangoing ships and a flotilla of hopeful sailing boats anchored against the wooden jetties. It is still a magnificent sight. The fading moon catches the tips of the small waves rippling across the river and creeps up across the carved wooden prows of the sleeping ships, transforming the oiled riggings into ghostly snakes of silver and blue. No matter how familiar the panorama, Ruth can never suppress the excitement which fills her each time she sees a ship with its cargo of mystery, gliding into the harbour like a crane. On the opposite bank lie the small towns of Deutz and Mühlheim, located within the Protestant domain belonging to the Hohenzollerns, an area outside the Catholic territory of Cologne. Looking downriver towards Mühlheim, Ruth can just see the grey tower of the small Calvinist church which sits at the top of the main street. Its tiny scale forms a stark contrast to the towering half-built spire of the Catholic cathedral on the opposite shore with the wooden crane on top, bent out like a beak.

To the south of Mühlheim is Deutz. Ruth grew up in the narrow crowded streets of the small ghetto, amongst the remnants of what was once the thriving Jewish

community of Cologne before the infamous pogrom of St Bartholomew's night in 1349. That night nearly every Jewish man, woman and child within the city walls was slaughtered. The few who escaped emigrated to more sympathetic cities like Frankfurt or Amsterdam, even as far east as Cracow. But some families struggled on. And, joined by new settlers, recreated a small outpost on the right bank of the Rhine in Protestant territory which was marginally more tolerant.

A cluster of Jewish women are waiting at the river bank for a barge to take them back across to Deutz. Ruth guesses they have been selling their wares — hot bread and cheese — to the Dutch and Spanish sailors marooned on their boats due to quarantine. Despite the fact that she is wearing the same uniform, the Orthodox women look archaic to Ruth with their double-peaked caps and long-sleeved robes, the obligatory yellow circle stitched onto the breast. Absentmindedly she traces her own circle, which Miriam has dutifully sewn on. It is the emblem Jews have been forced to wear in Germany for over a century and means that Ruth cannot travel into Cologne, or anywhere else in the Rhineland, without permission. It is a decree which has forced many Jews to resort to bribery or journeying with a Christian escort to ensure safe passage.

The cart arrives at the first of a series of barges which together form a floating bridge across the Rhine. Ruth and Miriam disembark and the driver leads the nervous horse onto the vessel. In the distance the midwife can see the water mills grinding away, while in front of her the chimneys of Deutz blow thin streams of grey into the sky. It seems centuries away from her time in Amsterdam.

The cart rolls over onto the next barge. It is January and the river roars past, swollen with melted snow. The frosts have been bitter for as long as Ruth can remember, although her father often tells of the winters of his childhood which lacked the icy harshness and relentless cold of recent times. 'It is God's retribution for thirty years of war — Christians fighting Christians, over what? No wonder he let the North Sea freeze and allowed King Gustav to march across with his army of toy Swedish soldiers. *Altsding lozt zich ois mit a gevain . . .* everything ends in weeping,' Elazar would finish philosophically. Ruth turns back towards the rushing water and allows the incessant roar to fill her head and empty her mind. It is a deliberate ploy she uses when she remembers her father;

it is the only way she can rid herself of the overwhelming sorrow she feels when she thinks of how he cannot forgive her for her flight, her silence and now her presence back in her hometown. She has spent hours standing outside the house she grew up in, waiting for the old man to make that first step, to lift the religious ban. But Elazar has not yet found forgiveness for his daughter's betrayal.

When Ruth first returned from Amsterdam, it was only through her father's pleading with the rabbinic council that she was allowed to stay in Deutz at all and practise as a midwife. Now, regarded as a heretic by the community, no amount of safe deliveries will ever absolve her. And as the chief rabbi, any clemency would be seen as an audacious and politically dangerous move — in this way Elazar's hands are tied. But still Ruth lives in hope. She longs to sit beside her father and speak with him of her travels, to reassure him that the young daughter he knew still exists. But she struggles to fit in; in reality she never has. Life back in Deutz is a constant balancing act between the security of tradition and superstition and the searing intellectual curiosity she was born with. Cursed with, she sometimes thinks.

They arrive at the opposite bank. With wheels creaking the cart rolls off the barge and into the thick mud. Ruth shouts at the coachman to avoid the town square — the resident street of chief Rabbi Elazar ben Saul — and she and Miriam climb back on board.

Soon they are on the outskirts of the settlement, trundling down a back lane which opens out into the countryside that lies beyond Deutz. Forest, much of it green saplings, has started to creep over the fallow farmland, swallowing up the edges of the small town. It amazes Ruth how much of the countryside, particularly in the north and north-east, still has not recovered from the Thirty Years' War. The land here remains lush, but further north lie the abandoned fields, the burnt-out farmhouses. A third of the peoples of Germania have been slaughtered, their lands ravaged repeatedly by Protestant and Catholic, Frenchman, Swede and Prussian.

She stares at the broad back of the coach driver. He probably fought, she thinks, they all did. But he was one of the lucky ones. In many places the working men are only now reappearing, most of them refugees in search of a new start in the empty cities of the north and south. Dutch Calvinists, Italians, even Swedes have fled to the Rhineland, their suffering visible in their hollow cheeks and haunted eyes. Suspicious of these strangers, the local Germans grow defensive and bitter. Resentful of the loss of their own sons, they are being forced to embrace more difference. Now is not a good time to be a foreigner.

The horse whinnies and rears then refuses to go on. The coachman, grumbling, dismounts and trudges through the slush towards a frost-covered mound in the centre of the road. He pokes at it with his whip and an arm falls out, the skin mottled blue and muddy against the snow. The coachman lurches back and covers his mouth with his sleeve. 'Plague!'

He stumbles back to the cart. Ruth climbs down to examine the corpse but the driver grabs her arm. 'One touch and we're all doomed!'

'Calm yourself. I will know if it is plague or just poverty — remember I have some training as a medic.' She pulls away from him. Carefully brushing the snow from the wizened face of the man, she finds none of the telltale marks or swellings that speak of the Black Death. The corpse looks about sixty but Ruth guesses he was more likely forty; just another one of the thousands uprooted by the war who spend their lives walking from village to village begging for food, sleeping in ditches and fields. The lost peoples of Middle Europe.

'There is no plague here, just Mother Starvation. Load him up onto the cart, we'll give him a burial back in the village.' 'He's a Christian, *you* can't bury him.'

'In that case we'll leave him at the church door.'

'It's too much trouble. He's just driftwood, he's worth nothing to anyone.'

'He still has a soul.'

'But is it Lutheran or Catholic?'

'Do you think God cares?'

The coachman stares at her. If she were a man he would hit her. There is something about her authority which intimidates him. Maybe it is true that she has supernatural powers. He once drove her to the house of a possessed man and she had cured the shuddering invalid before his very eyes. The coachman is not prepared to argue with the devil. Still protesting he throws some old sackcloth over the body and hoists it up onto the back of the cart. The corpse weighs as much as a bag of twigs and there isn't even enough flesh on it to sell it to the secret anatomists back in Cologne. Curse the Jewish witch, he thinks, this would be the last time he drives for her if she didn't tip so well.

The cart wheels start up again. Soon the tall pine trees laden with snow give way to small neat fields where the Protestant farmers grow wheat, barley and oats. But now the fields are blanketed in white. Ruth knows some of the families: some, Dutch Calvinists; others, Lutherans from the north. She has delivered their babies. They are hospitable enough but guarded, always cautious.

The cart trundles its way towards Deutz. A hawk circles above, hopeful for carrion. Spiralling up from the cottage roofs are pillars of smoke from the bakeries. Today is Friday and already, even at six in the morning, the wives and daughters of the community are preparing for the sabbath meal.

Ruth is overwhelmed by a sense of homecoming. It is this feeling of belonging which finally drove her back to Deutz and reinforces her desire to reunite with her father. It is stronger even than the soaring emancipation she found in Amsterdam.