

Chapter One: As Above, So Below
Óbidos, Portugal, 1337 A.D.

“There is death in me.”

Dores Abel hummed as she set her journal on the cracked, wobbling table. The woman at her back moaned and repeated her ill omen. It was the kind of admission that would chill the inexperienced midwife, or at least the superstitious one, and Dores was nothing if not experienced.

"No, senhora, of course not," Dores cooed. "There is only life."

The woman rubbed her stomach, her teeth threatening to chew a hole through her pink, irritated lip. Her eyes refused to meet Dores' and drifted somewhere between them, as though she were trying to bridge the gap between life and death to gaze upon the decrepit thing that rotted in her womb.

Dores made no further comment. She had felt it herself over two weeks ago when the couple had first requested her services: the stillness, the eerie peace that resided over her swollen abdomen. There was nothing living in there, she knew it, but she could not bring herself to speak the words aloud. It would be her third failed delivery this year.

The first stillborn was understandable. A young girl, unwed, barely fourteen, frightened of her father's wrath and determined to take care of the problem herself. Dores was called when her parents found her in the barn with a broom handle inside of her. The family did not blame Dores when the half-formed thing slipped out, and even if they had, the family's shame would have silenced them.

The second was more complicated. An experienced mother, Dores had delivered three healthy babes to her over the years and had fully expected a fourth, though her patient's advancing age should have given Dores some pause. The pregnancy had gone without

complication. She administered the proper herbs and adhered to all of the required rituals, and the mother had heeded her every word. When the time came, however, the mother's hours of wailing produced one single, malformed corpse. Dores could remember the look on the woman's face even now, the shocked silence that follows a hurricane. She remembered meeting those quivering eyes and knowing that Dores' were the same, swept away by their shared failure and her fractured reputation. Dores carried the pain of that mother with her, as she did for all mothers who lost their young, but now she carried the scent of death, as well.

A third stillborn would spell her doom. Dores was certain of it. Already the village gave her a wide berth as she passed. She had even spied a man crossing his chest as she came to church for mass. They were only rumors now, easily dispelled by her three decades of experience. But that would not last much longer. It had been a mere yesteryear since the midwife in their neighboring village was burned for witchcraft, and the memory was still fresh in their minds. It was fresh with Dores most of all.

The mother whimpered and a great tremor rolled over her. Not long now. Dores straightened her back and began her work. She set out her satchel of wormwood and fennel, her lamb's oil and ergot, her sharp knife and birthing stool. She opened her journal and jotted down a few notes on the page entitled *Mãe Hebraica*. She removed the pins from the mother's hair and let her rough, black curls flow freely. She moved to the window and pulled the shutters closed, leaving the light of a single candle to illuminate the room. Sweat glistened off the mother's brow in the feeble glow.

Dores felt a strange peace in such moments, the recreation of the womb giving her the ghostly sense of remembered safety. But tonight the shadows felt oppressive, perhaps even

threatening. She muttered an oath of protection under her breath and spat on the floor before her charge could see.

There was a knock on the door and Dores wedged it open to find the crumbling face of the innkeeper. He wordlessly passed a handful of clean blankets through the crack. The tiny moon-shaped face of Dores' five-year-old daughter peeked under his arm, quivering with excitement. Her little Estela often came with her on birthing days, as she was set to inherit Dores' task. But fear and intuition told her that a firm wall should remain between this birth and her child. Dores thanked the inn-keep and gave her daughter a brief nod before clicking the door shut, muttering admonitions. She had sent for the blankets over an hour ago.

The mother's eyes widened, the white scleras glowing against her dark skin. Her lips parted in a silent cry, but then the sound came like thunder after a lightning strike. Delayed, but inevitable. It was time.

Dores rolled up her sleeves and slathered her hands in the oil. She took position on the birthing stool and rested a hand on the mother's abdomen.

"Breathe now, senhora. Just breathe."

"Where is Jacob?" she gasped.

Dores patted her arm, "He is outside."

"I beg of you, please send for him."

"I cannot," Dores said softly. "Men have no part in this. This task is yours alone."

"I beg," she whimpered.

"I cannot."

It had been hard enough for Dores to convince the man to leave them be. He should be in the church, head bent to God and praying for the safety of his wife and child. Alas, their customs would not allow them to enter that sacred place.

They had almost refused her services, at first. They wanted someone of their creed, a midwife who would share their superstitions. But there were none to be found in this Christian village, and as visitors, they were straining the hospitality of their hosts enough. Dores found it strange that such a young couple would risk traveling while with child, but their avoidance of the topic was enough to convince Dores not to reprimand them for it. Though she was just a poor country midwife, she had heard stories over the years, the troubling tales of a southern homeland unfit for any of their kind to survive. Dores knew better than to pry, as much as she might wish to.

As it was, she had enough trouble fathoming the customs that they considered common. When they explained the practice of cutting boys, she shuddered to think of it, but she conceded that her store of strange herbs and hushed incantations rose more than a few brows on their own. It would be unfair to cast judgment on them when it had been cast on her many times over. A mother was a mother, a babe a babe. It was Dores' honor to serve them all.

Another scream ripped through the room and Dores gripped the woman's legs with practiced ease. There was a great deal of blood, but nothing that alarmed her. The mother was strong, her constitution unshakable. She would survive to birth many more children after this one, even if Dores was not able to see it.

No, she thought, this little one would live. Dores' death would come, but by God, it would not come with this child.

"Come forth, child!" Dores cried. "Come forth!"

"He will not come!" The mother cried, "I cannot!"

Dores moved to grip the woman by the shoulders.

"You will do it, as a thousand mothers have done before you and a thousand more will in years to come. This is the task that God has given our sex. Do you doubt in your God? For I have no doubt in mine!"

She was shouting now, far louder than she had in previous births, but the soon-to-be mother had two lives to save today. Her burden was greater than most.

If the chamber was meant to imitate the womb, they had made a poor example of it. There was such quaking, such violent wailing, that Dores was convinced the fiends of Hell would rise to dance in the blood that pooled on the creaking floor. Dores trembled herself, her years of steely resolve swallowed by the shadows that cloaked them.

The mother's cries reached a cadence of animalistic magnitude. Dores shook her once, twice, commanding her in the forbidden tongue to bring the new one forth.

And then it was over. The dark, bloated thing slithered from the woman like an overfed serpent and coiled on the ruined bed sheet. Dores rushed from the woman's side and swept it into her arms.

He was fully formed, but it was very much obvious to Dores that the pitiful thing had never been alive. Every inch of him was still and stiff, the limbs and joints having never been tested. He was like a doll that had been discarded in the dirt. Dores' heart thudded an ominous beat, each one a reminder that the last was drawing near.

No, she thought. It will not end this way.

The mother closed her eyes, exhausted, and Dores set to work. She turned to her journal and, with one more glance at the mother, turned to a page she had titled *Respiração*. She set the

child on the table and gathered every herb she had: sage, mugwort, yarrow, fennel. Some would not suit her purpose, but as her mother always told her, it was the words that mattered, not the materials. She took her mortar and pestle and ground them into a powder. She took the skein of fresh spring water meant for the mother and poured it into the mixture.

Then she did what her mother told her she must never do. She pricked her thumb with her sharp knife and let three drops of crimson fall into the bowl. She chanted as she worked, a whisper, so the mother could not hear. But as her hands trembled and the babe continued to cool, Does' hesitation lent to recklessness, and she began to speak her words aloud.

“Spirits of the earth, I beseech thee. Let his chest swell like the tide and never wane. Let his blood run like a drove of wild horses. Let his heart pound without ceasing. I pray, allow this boy to live. Live and live and live...”

Breath catching, heart faltering, Does dipped her index finger into the mixture and swept it across the child's brow. His little face was so still.

"Live," Does whispered foolishly. "Live for us."

Please, her heart begged. She was not ready.

"How does he fare?" the mother asked, "Does he live?"

Does hesitated. Her next words would seal her fate, though it had been decided long before this moment. She opened her mouth to respond.

Another scream stole the breath from her. The mother's eyes rolled back in her head as her back arched, black knuckles a shocking white, stark against the red maw between her legs. Confusion roiled through the midwife, and then hope.

Another. There was another.

Dores all but tossed the stillborn onto the bed. She grasped the woman's knees and urged her on, chanting every spell she could recall, every incantation that had been passed on to her from her own mother and her mother before that, the words of the ancients heralding the new.

The second babe was quicker, alarmingly so, and Dores administered a concoction of yarrow and honey to stay the bleeding and prevent fever. Finally, the labor was over, and Dores pulled the silent girl away to inspect.

Beautiful. Fully-formed. Lifeless.

Dores could have wept, but instead she quietly placed the child next to her brother, their little bodies reunited, if only for a moment. What should have been a room of fresh screaming was eerily still, peaceful as life could never be.

"Why do they not cry?" the mother asked through gasping. Dores felt the woman's panic reflected by her own.

"Be at peace, senhora," Dores replied, "God has them now."

It was a lie, of course. They were children of Israel, and thus denied that paradise. Even if their parents knew Christ, they were dead long before Dores could baptize them. Their souls were lost.

She expected a great wailing, as all mothers who lose their brood are prone to do, but this mother was strangely calm. Through the sweat, the blood, and the exhaustion, she locked eyes with Dores with fierce resolve.

"Inspect them again," she said. Dores sighed. This was not uncommon, either: a refusal of the real, a foolish certainty that they were not meant for such agony.

"I am sorry," the midwife said again. Hazel eyes held her in place, powerful despite the fatigue. Does was reminded of the woman's ill omen. *There is death in me*. She wondered what magic roiled beneath her surface that gave her such certainty now, as it had then.

"I shall not repeat myself," the woman said. "Inspect them."

Does blinked at the woman's impertinence but did as she was bid. She ran her hands over the little girl's body, but she did not need to feel for breath to tell that the last of her mother's warmth had fled, leaving only a gently cooling husk. She hefted the girl in her arms anyway, wiping away the excess moisture and laying her in her mother's arms.

The woman stared at her child, expressionless, before turning back to the midwife.

"The other, now. Make haste."

Does swallowed thickly and continued her work. She gathered up the boy and cut his cord, mostly out of respect than any necessity. As she cradled him in her arms and cleaned her failed concoction from his perfect face, she realized something alarming.

He was warm.

Hands fluttering like a bird in flight, Does shifted the child and vigorously rubbed his chest. She stoked the feeble flicker of light within, coaxing life forth with the careful desperation of a man in midwinter.

Hope is a violent thing, and in that moment it flared in all of its ferocity. Does gripped the child's face and shouted. It was the second time that the child's existence was met with screaming.

"Live, child! Live!"

And live he did. Tiny lungs expanded, testing their strength like fledgling wings, and then another cry needled through the air, sharp and wavering, but more beautiful than any church bell. She gasped at the miracle in her arms, the swell of relief and wonder in her breast.

She bathed the child in a daze, rubbed his body in salt and a thin layer of honey over his gums. His screams worsened, and it heartened her to hear such healthy lungs bellow out. She should have been bothered that he had been so still in the womb, should have remembered that his body was stiff when he burst forth, but Dores only accepted it for the blessing that it was. He was her little miracle, Lazarus come again.

"Bring him here, midwife Abel. Bring me my child."

The strange trance lifted and Dores nodded before passing the small, mewling thing to his mother. She went to remove the girl's body, but the woman's arm held fast.

"Allow me this, Abel. I shall never hold them both again."

Dores relented. Her life had been spared this day. She could allow for such sentiment.

She set to tending to the mother. She cleaned and stitched where it was needed, administered the healing herbs and whispered the blessings and spells that would encourage her milk to flow and her body to mend. The living child, having found his lungs and deemed them sufficient, screamed long and well, and Dores wept with every wail.

She watched the trio as she worked, the strange antithesis of the scene. One child, motionless and cool, a peacefully rotting thing, the other a flailing, heated flurry of motion and confused desire. At the center, the mother, composed and dignified as a saint.

The mother smiled, and in that smile Dores saw the span of all life, saw the depths of sorrow in perfect harmony with soaring jubilation. Their eyes met, and Dores' suspicions were confirmed. There was indeed a power there, power not unlike her own, though the woman likely

did not even know she had it. Dores was no clairvoyant, but she could see the dark days that lay ahead of her and her brood. Misery followed all who had such gifts.

The living babe paused in his feeble fury, grasping hands finding a lock of his mother's onyx hair. His eyes squinted open, irises bright as polished silver, and Dores gasped, finding Christ anew in those burnished depths. He was so beautiful.

"Pray, senhora," Dores whispered, lest she break the spell. "What is his name?"