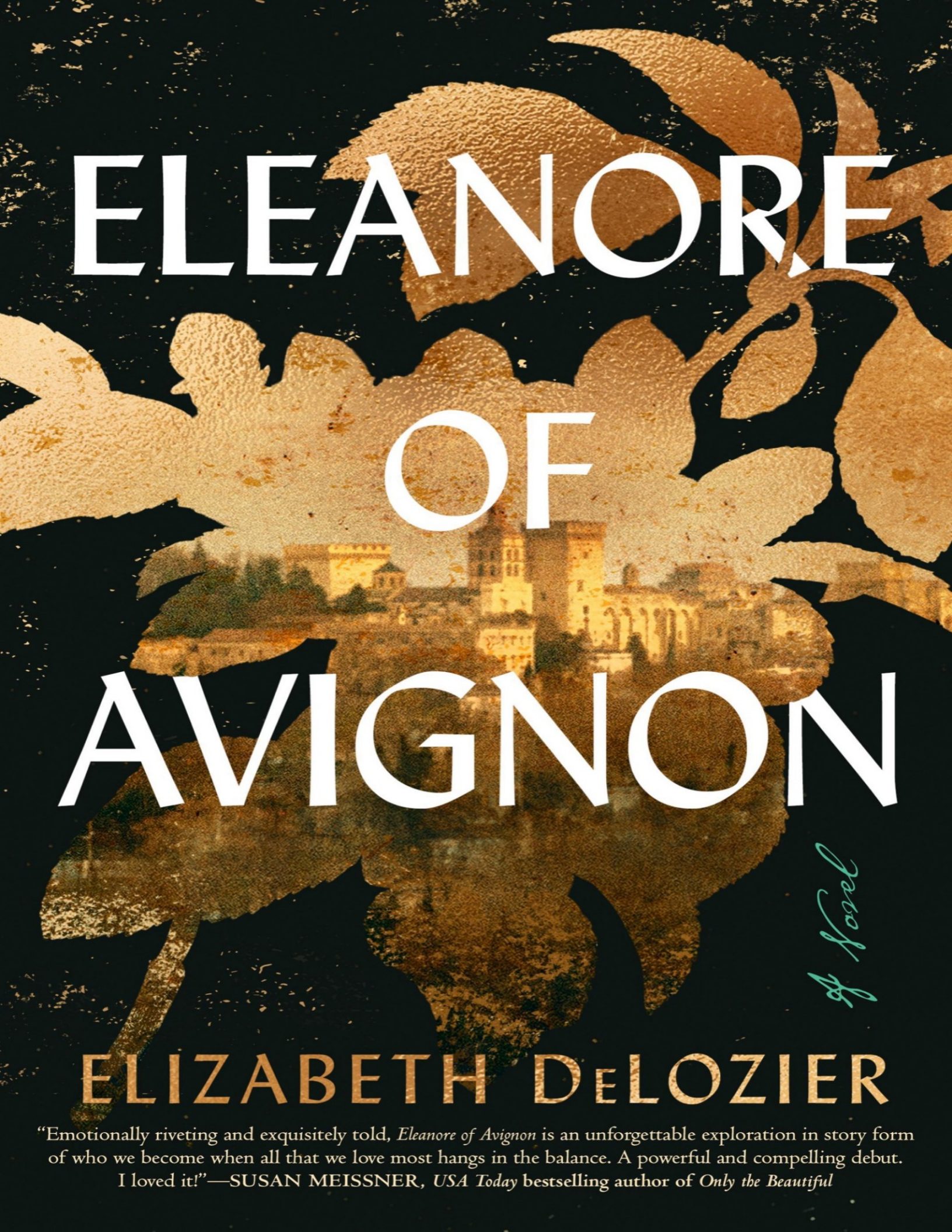

"Emotionally riveting and exquisitely told, *Eleanore of Avignon* is an unforgettable exploration in story form of who we become when all that we love most hangs in the balance. A powerful and compelling debut. I loved it!"—SUSAN MEISSNER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Only the Beautiful*

Eleanore of Avignon

A NOVEL

Elizabeth DeLozier

DUTTON

DUTTON

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

penguinrandomhouse.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: DeLozier, Elizabeth, author.

Title: Eleanore of Avignon : a novel / Elizabeth DeLozier.

Description: [New York] : Dutton, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023047005 | ISBN 9780593475034 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593475041 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Black Death—Fiction. | Midwives—Fiction. | LCGFT: Historical fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3604.E44737 E44 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240110

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023047005

Cover design by Sarah Oberrender

Cover image of sunset panorama of Avignon by Tashka/Getty; image of floral overlay by Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK/Bridgeman Images

BOOK DESIGN BY LAURA K. CORLESS, ADAPTED FOR EBOOK BY MOLLY JESZKE

appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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For my mother and aunt, who have been so generous with their love of history and literature

But the stars that marked our starting fall away.
We must go deeper into greater pain,
For it is not permitted that we stay.

—Dante Alighieri, Inferno Canto VII

Chapter One

November 1347

The sun is low by the time I reach the woods. I pause at the crest of the hill and look back the way I came, pulling my cloak tighter against the wind.

The river below winds a ribbon of molten gold around the city walls. The bone-white steeple of Notre-Dame des Doms reaches over the rooftops like a scolding finger, the scaffolding of the Palais Neuf rising daily beside it. Even from this distance, frantic hammer blows and the shouts of stone masons echo across the water. When Pope Clement VI arrived in Avignon five years ago he was not sufficiently impressed with the newly built palace of his predecessor, Benedict XII—no, Clement's palace must be the largest in the world, the most elaborate.

It is a blessing to be out of the city, to breathe the sweet smell of earth instead of urine and woodsmoke. I step off the cart-rutted road into the dappled shadows with my empty basket swinging.

I could sleepwalk this invisible path my mother trod through ancient oak trees, past crumbling Roman walls and forgotten olive groves. Dusk comes early to the woods this time of year; I must work quickly to be back before the city gates are locked at nightfall.

Under the cool shade of the oaks, comfrey grows. I spot the tiny purple flowers and kneel, pull my knife from the waistband of my skirt, and slide it through their slender stalks. I review my mental list: comfrey for Anes's swollen knees, fennel for the baker's fussy baby, pennyroyal to keep the fleas

at bay. They are relentless since the rain started, and Margot keeps me up all night with her scratching.

The thought catches like a canker sore. *Margot*.

Our argument from the morning plays in my head, the words worn smooth as river stones with repetition.

"Why must it be him?" I'd demanded, pacing our room like a cat. "You could have anyone, Margot. Any merchant or solicitor or physician. Why must it be Erec Dupont?"

My twin sister sat on our bed, spine straight and hands folded. "Because I love him," she said simply.

"And it doesn't hurt that he is rich," I retorted.

"That is unfair," she said, the color rising in her cheeks. "You know I do not marry him for his money."

In a few short months she will leave me and our comfortable home in the rue des Lices for the echoing Dupont mansion, where her future mother-in-law presides like a pale, spiteful spider. From our family pew I shall watch the back of my sister's dark head bent meekly beside the other merchants' wives with their wealth evident in the lace at their cuffs and the jewels in their ears. And I will patch my skirts, dry herbs and brew tonics, make ointments for kitchen burns and set broken bones. It will be my fate to care for my father as he ages, watch as my own reflection becomes tired and lined.

"All those years when you and Mother were together in the woods, or making house calls, or bent over your medicines, where was I?" There was no anger in the turn of her mouth, only a surprised kind of hurt.

The memory of a hundred mornings came rushing back like something dreamed: Mother's knuckles against the Duponts' elaborately carved front door, Erec's pale hair glinting in the gloom of the hall. Before we could afford to hire Anes, Margot spent many days in that cold house.

"You had Mother," my sister continued. "And I had Erec."

"You could have come with us," I said, holding the guilt away. "We asked you, I remember. And you did come, once or twice." But even as I said the

words, they sounded hollow. I saw Margot as a little girl squeezing her eyes shut, clutching Mother's skirts with bunched fists, sent to wait outside with the other children while Mother and I pulled their new brother or sister into the world.

"You know I was never much for blood, Elea," Margot said. "But I did like holding the babies."

And most of all I dread the day when I am called to Margot's bedside as her midwife. I pray she will not die as Mother did, with the blood soaking the fine down of her marriage bed and I helpless, again, to save her.

A howl cuts through the cold air.

I freeze. I scan the woods around me, alert as a rabbit, but nothing moves between the dark trees. Images of wolves from some book of chivalry spring into my head, but no wolf has been seen in Avignon in decades.

The animal howls again, low and desperate, ending in a whimper.

It came from the meadow.

I reach into my basket, pull out the battered tin spoon I use for digging up fennel bulbs and hold it before me like a weapon. I walk forward, aware of my raucous breathing, the suck of my boots in the wet ground. Ten steps. Twenty. Thirty. I reach the thin trees and pooling golden light at the edge of the forest.

Long ago, some industrious peasant hewed this clearing out of the woods. In the middle of the meadow sits the skeleton of a cottage, crumbling walls with no roof and vines creeping through the stones like ladies' hair. It was my mother's favorite place. And at the side of the cottage, where the wild fennel grows, stands a wolf.

I step reflexively behind an oak with my pulse tripping. Did it see me? Should I run? I am about twenty paces away, but if I step lightly…

The animal whimpers, a pathetic canine sound that tugs at my chest. Ignoring my wiser instincts, I peer around the edge of the tree.

The creature has not noticed me. Its great head is bent, worrying at something in the grass. I examine the ridges of its loose body, the powerful haunches, the shape of its head. A dog, not a wolf—but unlike any dog I have

seen. This is an animal caught between its wild ancestors and the friendly creatures that lie beneath tables and beg for scraps. Its black hair stands like quills between ridged shoulder blades, its face is long and angular.

The dog cries out again. With a sinking feeling in my belly, I realize its leg is caught in a trap.

I have seen the victims of poachers on Queen Joanna's land—rabbits, foxes, the occasional genet—but never, before, alive. They lie with glassy eyes, their muzzles stained with blood from trying to gnaw off the trapped limb, their precious pelts picked by vultures.

I say a prayer, return the spoon to my basket, and abandon my hiding place for the brassy light of the meadow.

The dog swings its head toward my sudden movement. It jumps back, yelps as the iron bites deeper. I steady the blood thrumming in my ears and put a hand on the oak trunk. I reach out to the dog the way my mother taught me, imagining the words and actions in my mind.

Hello, brave creature. I am sorry you are in pain. I will not hurt you. I can help, if you let me.

The dog stares back at me, ears flattened against the long skull. I note the powerful muscles, the thick pointed claws. But he—yes, it is a he—is still. He is listening.

I can open the trap and release you. But you must trust me.

His wild eyes hold mine for the space of ten heartbeats. Then, slowly, he inclines his head. When he lifts his gaze again, the wolf is gone. Only the dog remains.

I hold my breath and step through the dead grass.

Just out of his reach I kneel down, bring my face level with his. I am not my mother. Once free, he could rip out my throat, leave me to bleed out on the leaves beside him.

Inch by inch I raise a hand, stretch it toward him. His breath is hot on my face, my nose fills with the wet wool of his coat. He flinches as my hand meets his breastbone. Through the thick fur and muscles his heart throbs in its cage of bones.

He takes a deep breath. His shoulders relax, ears soften. Beneath my fingers his heart slows, and he is still.

"Good," I whisper. "Good dog."

Satisfied he will not hurt me, I turn my attention back to the trap. Under the dog's paw, at the center of the device, there is a pin. If I can free it from its coupling, I should be able to wrest it open. Gently, carefully, so slowly, I place my left hand on the base to steady it. With my right hand I grab the end of the pin; it is slippery with blood, caught in the metal. I wrap the hem of my skirt around it, twist and pull. The pin starts to move. I slide it all the way out, take another breath, and wrench the jaws of the trap apart.

The dog cries out again as the iron teeth separate from his leg, pulling dried blood and fur with them. He lifts his paw out gingerly. It hangs limp at the end of his leg, white bone visible through the gore. He tries to put weight on it and yelps. Without thinking I reach my hands out toward him. He turns and runs, limping, into the trees.

I stand up, shaking, and call to him in my gentlest voice. I unwrap the loaf of bread Anes insisted I pack, hold it high so the breeze might bring the scent to him. I walk a wide circle around the cottage, hoping he will reappear. But he is gone.

He would have come back to my mother. He would have placed his head in her lap, allowed her to stroke his ears. He would have followed her home.

Animals do not love me, not the way they loved her. When I am out in the woods, I never look down to find a snake wound around my ankle, as though enjoying the way my skin feels under its scaly belly. Deer do not disentangle themselves from the shadows to rest their velvet noses in my open palms, as if I am the priest at Saint-Agricol, my hands holy water.

But sometimes, I feel someone following me and glance over my shoulder to catch a cat curling around the corner with his tail high. Or watch a bird land too close, then hop closer, bright black eyes surveying me with interest. It always ends the same, though: the cat runs off with a hiss, the bird flies away, chirping a warning to her friends. I am not who they thought I was.

I try to shake the ache in my chest that accompanies memories of my mother. It comes unheralded: I'm washing dishes with Anes or walking between the market stalls with Margot and suddenly I remember. *My mother is dead*. It sweeps through me like the winter mistral and blows out all the candles I have lit against it.

Two hollow years have passed since she was here, swinging her skirt, humming a ballad, touching my arm to point out some growing thing and explaining its use if it had one or why it should be avoided. *Everything is strung together,* she said. *Once you know that, you are never alone. Look around you. The earth is calling*.

And if it weren't for Mathilde Dupont, Erec's mother, she might be beside me now.

The wind picks up, hurrying dark clouds across the sky. On the ground along the south wall of the ruined cottage, shielded from the wind and coming rain, I lay the loaf of bread and two apples from my basket. Thinking of the dog in the wet night with his wounded leg, I pull the cloak from my shoulders and fold it into a neat square against the wall with a prayer to Saint Francis that he will find this offering.

I turn back toward Avignon, to Father and Anes. And, for a bit longer, Margot.

I am almost to the road before I realize I forgot the pennyroyal and curse under my breath. Another week of flea bites for Margot and sleepless nights for me.

The wind reaches cold fingers up the cuffs of my sleeves and down the neck of my dress as I join the press of people entering the city from the Pont Saint-Bénézet. The flags mounted over the gate snap in the wind: the red-and-white triple tiara of the pope, Queen Joanna's blue-and-white fleur-de-

lis. The scarlet-uniformed guards stare straight ahead, sword handles and scabbards glittering in the last of the light.

Inside the walls, the sounds of the city eclipse all thought: voices call in greeting or advertisement, dogs bark and mules bray, cartwheels clatter over cobblestones. Townspeople scurry through the narrow streets with hats clutched to heads against the wind. I turn onto the rue des Lices as the first blaze of lightning splinters the sky.

Voices carry from the open windows of the house on the corner along with the smell of cooking meat. A booming laugh—Father. A light contralto—Margot. And a third voice, mellow and masculine. Erec.

I want to run back to the woods.

"There she is!" Father says as I enter our home, getting to his feet with some difficulty; his bad leg bothers him with the change in weather. He is a slight man, an athlete in his youth, the fastest runner, the surest swimmer, all wasted when his horse sunk a foot in a rabbit burrow and trapped Father's leg beneath him. My parents met when Mother's father—a physician, she his young assistant—came to treat my father. He is balding now, but his face is still handsome, still suntanned and youthful despite the hours hunched over the pope's ledgers by candlelight.

Margot and Erec stand across from him, their coloring a pretty juxtaposition of dark and light. I always forget how tall Erec is: although he is eighteen, a year older than me and Margot, in my head he is still eight, or ten, or twelve, throwing apples at passersby from the roof, knees scraped by tree trunks or smeared with river mud. This broad-shouldered man in fine black wool is a stranger. Only his hair is unchanged since childhood, the same pale gold as his mother's.

"You're late," says my sister, a frown clouding her forehead. "We feared you would be caught in the rain."

Although identical at birth, after the age of three or four no one mistook us. Our eyes are Father's, wide-set and hazel, our noses narrow and straight above small mouths. But under Mother's dark widow's peak, Margot's skin is pale and creamy as milk, mine as brown as Father's and freckled across nose

and cheekbones. When my rough hands bump against my sister in sleep, I am always surprised at her softness, the fine grain of skin and flesh beneath her chemise.

I hold out my arms to show I am dry. “As you see, I have returned unscathed.”

“Where is your cloak?” Margot asks.

I think quickly. They would not understand the feral dog, how I knew he would not hurt me. Only Mother would.

“It was warm in the meadow,” I lie. “I hung it on a branch while picking herbs and forgot it.”

“That was foolish.” Margot looks through the open window at the low sky, her hair gleaming in its complicated braid. “It will be ruined by tomorrow. You can use Mother’s until I have time to sew you a new one.”

I can tell by the set of her jaw that she is still angry with me from this morning, but she makes her voice pleasant for Erec’s sake.

“We are celebrating!” says Father exuberantly, gesturing to the wine jug and cups on the table.

I raise my eyebrows in a question, although in the twisting of my guts I know the answer.

“Margot and I have set a date,” Erec says.

My sister turns to him, happiness spreading over her face like a sunrise.

“We will marry in spring, when my father returns from Paris.”

I had feared they would marry sooner. But it is set. Funny, to dread spring.

They are all staring at me, and I realize I have not responded. I bare my teeth in a smile.

“That’s wonderful news,” I say. “Congratulations.”

Father sits ungracefully on the bench. “Take a seat, Elea,” he says, pouring more wine.

I shift the basket on my arm as though it is heavy, although it contains only a few sprigs of comfrey. “In a moment,” I say. “I’ll unpack my basket and see if Anes needs help with supper.”

Without waiting for a response, I cross the hall and turn down the narrow passage that leads to the kitchen.

Anes bends over a pot on the fire with her back to the door, sampling the contents with a wooden spoon. I step over the threshold and drop my basket on the scrubbed oak table with a thud.

Anes starts, bumping her head on the low mantel.

"Oh! Sorry, Anes." I hurry over to where she stands, rubbing her forehead.

"Saint's blood, child," she snaps. "You nearly sent me into the fire!" I wipe away the smear of soot on her temple and inspect the pink skin beneath.

"I expect you shall make a miraculous recovery," I say solemnly, kissing the spot.

She pushes me away. "Those carrots need peeling."

Grateful for the distraction, for something to do with my hands, I get to work.

Anes cooks like she does everything, with the Provençal love of simplicity partnered with a passion for perfection. She hovers around the kitchen like a plump fairy, tasting and salting and spicing with abandon. The results are always delicious.

At ten, Anes lost her entire family to the pox. She was left no money—her parents had been tenant farmers—so she was shipped off to the nearest, poorest convent to be raised by nuns. But she always had a gift in the kitchen. At sixteen she left the convent with a young baroness whose family plucked her from religious life to marry a wealthy wine merchant. The girl could rescind her lifelong vows of chastity, but she could not live without Anes's tarts.

Anes moved from house to house across the city as fortunes waxed and waned. When Margot and I were eleven, she came to live with us and quickly became a member of the family. Despite the countless hours spent in the kitchen with her, I have none of her culinary magic. When she was sick last winter, I made chicken soup—something I have helped her cook countless

times—but when I brought her a bowl, she took one spoonful and spat it out. My concoction tasted like soap.

I look up now to see Anes surveying me, hands on wide hips.

"What's the matter with you?" she demands, looking me up and down. "Why so glum?"

"Nothing," I mutter. "I'm just tired. I walked up Mount Andaon."

"Not just today. The past few weeks. Since the engagement."

"It's all the rain," I lie, placing the last naked carrot in the bowl. "Tomorrow I'll brew a tea against melancholy. What else needs to be done?"

Twenty minutes later we emerge, sweating, from the kitchen, each bearing a heavy tray. Anes made pork and apple pie, the flaky golden crust decorated with pastry leaves and egg wash, boiled carrots tossed in butter and thyme, and courgette and onion soup.

"It smells delicious, Anes," Erec says, lifting the tray lightly from her hands. She beams at him.

We take our places at the table: me beside Father; Erec across from me, beside Margot. Anes cuts and serves us each a generous slice of pie, then excuses herself. As always when we have guests, she will eat her supper in the kitchen.

Father fills the cups without watering down the wine for me and Margot. It is his finest, deep red and complex, reserved for the specialest of occasions. Father is exuberant. The only son of the city's wealthiest wool merchant: a better match than he could have prayed for. Beautiful and accomplished though she may be with her Latin, her household accounting learned at Father's side, her perfect needlework, Margot is still the daughter of a papal notary and a dead midwife. Every burgher's wife and even some of the minor nobility clambered to match their girls with Erec Dupont. But for him, there has only ever been Margot. He will dress her in velvet and silk, keep her larder full of sugar and spices, buy meat for the table every day of the week. Never mind the madwoman upstairs, filling her head with poison.

Father bows his head to say grace. "Bless us, oh Lord, and these thy gifts, which we receive from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord." He pauses.

“And thank you, Lord, for the forthcoming union of Margot and Erec. May their lives be long and happy, and may they be blessed with many children. Amen.”

“*Amen*,” we chorus, crossing ourselves.

I sip my wine, taste the grapes ripening in the hot summer sun, the dark rich soil in which they grew, and swallow the image of Margot, lying pale and sweat-soaked as blood blossoms between her legs.

“What news of Allistair?” asks Father after a few appreciative bites of pie.

Allistair Dupont, the eldest son of a middling cloth dyer, was blessed with a head for numbers and an eye for a good bargain. At the age of sixteen he took over the family business and quickly expanded a small storefront in the rue des Teinturiers to a successful trading company with holdings in Paris, Bruges, and Lille. His marriage into Mathilde’s family—one of the oldest in Provence—gave him connections in Navarre and Aragon when King Philip’s war made it impossible to buy cheap wool from England. He is haughty, loud, and self-important. My mother quietly despised him.

“Father is well,” Erec says, setting down his fork. “He is in Navarre, finalizing a contract. Then he travels to Paris. These rumors of illness and unrest have been good for business—people are buying wool as though the world is ending.”

“And Mathilde?” asks Father.

I feel Margot’s eyes on me and busy myself with my plate.

Erec takes a long sip of wine. “Mother is weak and feverish,” he says, “which is not uncommon for this time of year. Dr. Laurent has been by to bleed her daily. He says she will improve when the weather turns. But the fever will not break.”

“You did not tell me,” says my sister, concerned. “I would have visited her.”

“I did not want to worry you unnecessarily, my love. She is so often ill. But this affliction seems different.” Erec turns, unexpectedly, to me. “I was hoping that Elea might come by to examine her.”

The food turns to chalk in my mouth.

“The fever will not break,” he repeats. “She passes in and out of reality. Today, she called for Bietriz.”

My mother’s name sends a shiver through me.

I glance at my sister, see my own disquiet mirrored in her face. Two years have passed since the last time I saw Mathilde Dupont, twisted in scarlet sheets. *I know what you are.* And my mother, in her deep, understanding love, forgave her.

“I am not my mother,” I say, meeting Erec’s blue gaze. “If her condition is as serious as you say, you should send for another physician.”

He shakes his head. In the worried angles of his face, I catch a glimpse of the boy I knew. “We have had three physicians examine her. Father even brought one from Paris. The only medicines that made a lasting difference were Bietriz’s.”

“Elea,” says Father, his mild voice laced with a warning. “I’m sure your other patients will understand. Madame Dupont’s illness sounds serious.”

“I realize what I ask,” Erec interrupts gently. “And would not ask it if the circumstances were not grave.”

In their yearlong courtship I have done my best to avoid Erec, turned from the door when I heard his voice as often as I could without drawing attention. He has never mentioned what transpired between our mothers. Their sisterly bond broken in a night, the poisonous rumors that followed. Father, like Mother, forgave Mathilde, called her slipping mind a tragedy, and when Erec first asked to walk Margot home from mass on Sundays, Father welcomed him with open arms. But Erec must guess what I think of his mother.

I glance around the table, meet my sister’s pleading eyes and Father’s disappointed ones.

“She asked for Bietriz,” Erec repeats. “Please.”

And suddenly my mother’s voice rings through my head as clear as a bell, speaking the words she spoke that night.

Take pity on her, Elea. She knows not what she does. She is a prisoner of her own mind.