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INNAMORATA



BOOK ONE
OF THE HOUSE OF TEETH DUOLOGY

AVA REID



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I

THE BODY OF ADELE-BLANCHE

No corpse could be left to lie long enough for maggots, but there were leeches. There must be leeches. As befit a woman of her stature, fourteen leeches stood gathered around the body of Adele-Blanche, two furnished by each of the great houses of the Septinsular Covenant. They wore sepia-colored robes, the shade of tea cloths stained with tea.

In order to give the leeches room to work, the noble guests stood at a distance, on smooth, elevated pews of marble, which formed an oval around Adele-Blanche's body. Her body lay on the ground as the mud from the previous night's rainstorm cosseted and fondled her bare limbs. The mud pooled in the hollow place between the two halves of her rib cage, each half thrusting upward like a crested white bird. Her breasts sagged like empty waterskins, only loose, wrinkled flesh with no fat to engorge them. Her nipples were shriveled chestnuts.

It bothered Agnes only a little that her grandmother's nakedness was on display. The dead were afforded no dignity in Drepane.

The leeches stood about with arched backs, their spines compressed like a snake before it strikes, as the Most Esteemed Surgeon tottered up to his dais.

He could not ascend without assistance, and it was one of the leeches who offered his hand. The hood of the leech's robe fell back to reveal his bald, age-speckled head. There, just at the crease where the back of his throat connected to his skull, he had a very large, raised, and jagged birthmark in the shape of a leaping fish. At least, that was what it looked like to Agnes, from her vantage point. She supposed

that Marozia, who was standing to her left and a bit forward on the pew, might think it looked like a sickle or a sliver of melon or a half-smiling mouth.

At last, the Most Esteemed Surgeon was settled and standing upright. He cleared his throat four times. Agnes didn't blame him. It was an especially moist morning, with mist oozing between the black tree branches.

"This woman is dead," he intoned. "Expired. Extinct. Forever gone."

When his voice reached Agnes's ears, it fizzled like water dissolving on a hot pan into steam and nothingness. Her mind generated its own words to fill the space.

Adele-Blanche, Mistress of Teeth, ruled her noble house for a very long time. Agnes did not know her grandmother's exact year of birth, as it was forbidden to record such figures, so her mind supplied a rather poetic estimation. Her eyes had seen at least three-quarters of a century. She outlived her two daughters, Manon and Celeste. She is survived only by her grandchildren, including Marozia, heiress to the House of Teeth.

Agnes did not include herself in this accounting of her grandmother's life. She was unsure of where she belonged. But she held fast to these facts as if they were a piece of parchment that threatened to be snatched from her hand by a vicious gust of wind.

As her own private, silent remembrance ended, the voice of the Most Esteemed Surgeon reasserted itself.

"May you be consumed as a coal upon the hearth. May you dry up as water in a pail. May you become as small as a linseed grain, and much smaller than the hip bone of an itch-mite, and may you become so small that you become nothing."



Then it was time for the desecration. By decree of the Septinsular Covenant, this process required adherence to the strictest of tactics and the most ordered of schemes. Yet it had been performed upon all the dead

of Drepane for a hundred years or so, and thus there was no hesitation among the leeches, who sank to their knees before Adele-Blanche's body, immediately sullyng their sepia robes.

First came the leeches from the House of Blood. Their task was the most elaborate, their equipment the most baroque. One leech carried under his arm a fluted vessel, girthy at the bottom and then narrowing to a minuscule hole, an aperture too small even to accommodate a traditional wine cork. What it did accommodate, however, was the end of an extraordinarily thin leather tube. This tube at first hung as the limp cord of pig viscera that it was, until the leech blew into it and it inflated at once, as rigid as a man-at-arms. The other end was then fixed to a glinting metal spigot, hardly larger than a sewing needle but much sharper. This pierced the flaccid throat of Adele-Blanche.

Given that the pig-viscera tube was translucent, all the attendants could clearly observe Adele-Blanche's blood sluicing from her veins and into the fluted vessel. It was rather pulpy, and each time the tube clogged, one of the leeches flicked it with a single finger, the way one might repel a horsefly.

A curious thing occurred as the blood dripped into the vessel, though it happened inside Agnes's mind, where no one else could see. All of a sudden the blood became a quotidian liquid, like bathwater or soup broth. The blood was not her grandmother. Her grandmother was gone.

But just as suddenly as the realization occurred to her, with all its lovely weightlessness, it vanished again. Her grandmother's posthumous existence—that awareness, that truth that even in death she was not truly gone—dropped down upon her shoulders like a hissing, heavy house cat. She swallowed and tasted the bitterness of black henbane, the tongue-curling sweetness of mandrake.

Beside her, Marozia watched their grandmother's blood drain. She did not blink; her dark eyes did not even glisten.

Oddly, there was no representative from the noble House of Blood itself in attendance, only an ignoble member of their household guard. The leeches had some difficulty bringing him the now-filled vessel. It

swayed between them like a pendulum, and the mud sucked lecherously at their boots. These three servile delegates then departed wordlessly, vanishing into the dense wall of mist.

“An insult,” Marozia whispered, her lips barely moving. Her fingers reached out and gripped Agnes around the wrist. “Don’t you think?”

Agnes touched her cousin lightly on the shoulder. Then she tipped her head to indicate the retinue of gray-clad guards standing on the other side of the mud pit.

Marozia inhaled sharply. “An insult to the prince, you think?”

Agnes nodded.

“Well.” Marozia’s mouth thinned. “That’s a good sign, isn’t it? That already the Master of Blood equates our house with the Crown?”

Agnes stared down at the increasingly lugubrious mud. Perhaps she made too much of the House of Blood’s absence. Perhaps it was no more than coincidence that the Master of Blood, their venerable patriarch, could not attend himself. But even if illness or other business prevented him, surely he could marshal up a son or nephew to appear in his place? It was hard to deny the overtness of this breach of etiquette.

Still, she did think it must be directed at the Crown, if it was indeed an insult. It was the royal family who so ardently enforced the articles of the Septinsular Covenant, day in and grueling day out, corpse after corpse after corpse. Her grandmother would not have minded if the other houses declined to partake in this service. In fact, she would have been gleeful to know that her blood would not be drained and carried away in a fat-bellied cistern, would have been pleased at some glimmer of rebellion.

Yet rebellion it would be. The prince’s line had won Drepane by blade, and the laws of the Covenant they forged must be executed. Even in the Master of Blood’s rude absence, the ritual was fulfilled.

Thrasamund, Master of Eyes, fancied himself a man of exceptional charisma, so as his leeches set to work, he orated.

“How many gentle faces in attendance! The gentlest, of course, is of our dear prince. He has journeyed through reeking swamps and up

miserable cliffs, through the gloomy stench of mist, to the peak that upholds the Peake. What a dreadful odyssey. But the House of Teeth has always enjoyed its inscrutable isolation. Let us hope for the sake of the honorable and merciful prince that there will be no more deaths within Castle Peake for a good long time.”

“There will not be,” Marozia said.

It had started to drizzle. Thrasamund grinned widely under his beard. The beard was itself a momentous thing. It draped over the curve of his stomach in wry, fox-red curls. As if to maintain some sort of filamentary equilibrium, the hair on his head was entirely gone. His baldness shone like the back of the silver spoon his leeches used to scoop out Adele-Blanche’s eyes.

Luckily, the task of his leeches was quite simple, and so they were spared more of his speech. The eyes, once removed, were placed inside a leather purse. Staggering out of the mud pit, the leeches handed the purse to their master.

Unluckily, Thrasamund and his leeches did not depart. The Master of Eyes rocked back and forth on his heels and watched in a serene manner as the leeches from the House of Teeth descended upon their mistress’s corpse.

They had been her grandmother’s leeches, and they were Marozia’s leeches now. Agnes had known them both since she was a little girl. One was named Swallow, and the other was Wrestbone. She had seen them polishing their pliers in preparation for the event. Swallow held her grandmother’s mouth open with a gentleness none of the other leeches had afforded her body. Then Wrestbone removed each tooth with a brisk, dexterous tug, the tendons on the inside of his wrist tensing and bulging. For thirty-two teeth, this process was completed in under a minute. Then the teeth were deposited inside a velvet pouch, bunched closed with a drawstring.

It was Wrestbone who presented the pouch to Marozia, panting slightly from the exertion of scrabbling out of the mud pit. This was the first time Agnes saw her cousin’s eyes well up. But the tears stayed lodged resolutely along her lash line, like beads on a taut chain.

“Give them to Agnes,” she said. And then Marozia turned to face her. “Hold them, will you?”

Agnes nodded and accepted the pouch. She clasped it between her hands, as a child might clutch a firefly she had captured while frolicking in the purple dusk. Once, Agnes had held her captive too clumsily, mashing its fragile body between her finger and thumb. She had cried then, out of guilt and grief but also slightly out of envy, because Marozia’s firefly remained a lustily glowing little prisoner in her more delicate hands. Agnes knelt in the grass and smeared the juices of the insect’s demise into the dirt. When she stood up again, all evidence of its death was gone.

The leeches from the House of Hearts and the House of Lungs could do their work in tandem. All four bent down over the body, obscuring the finesses of their labor under reaching limbs and flapping robes. When they rose and stood back, Adele-Blanche’s chest was sliced down the middle in one grave stroke. The loose folds of skin, which parted to reveal the dark cavity half empty of organs, were now the purview of the House of Flesh.

“I don’t want to watch this,” Marozia said. “It’s raining again. Can’t they hurry up?”

They could not, Agnes knew. Indeed, this was the fastest she had ever seen the desecration performed. Perhaps it was the foul weather, or perhaps the other houses were merely treating their grandmother in death as they had treated her in life: as a disagreeable, vaguely malevolent presence that one feared either offending or overly flattering. To be in Adele-Blanche’s favor was just as unpleasant as being her enemy. Agnes understood this better than anyone.

Amycus, Master of Bones, had the most material to recover and the heaviest consignment to carry away; his leeches groaned and shook under the weight of their trunk, loaded with Adele-Blanche’s disassembled skeleton. But Amycus was a shrewd and efficient man, putting all things in his power to their best use. It was said that he slept on a bed frame constructed out of femurs and fibulae, and that his torches all burned inside sconces made from the ribs of children.

There was very little left of Adele-Blanche's body now. None of what remained was the inheritance of any great house, yet by Article III of the Covenant, it all must be obliterated immediately. The Covenant also restricted the methods of expunging it: There could not be a pyre; vultures could not be permitted to feast upon it; it could not be sent out to sea; and, of course, it could not be buried. So here at last was the paramount duty of the Most Esteemed Surgeon.

Both Swallow and Wrestbone helped the Surgeon down from his dais and allowed him to grip their arms for balance as he maneuvered toward the very last remains of their departed mistress.

The Most Esteemed Surgeon wore heavy wooden clogs. Holding on to Swallow and Wrestbone, he stomped Adele-Blanche's entrails into the mud. Thudding, squelching, like he was mashing grapes for wine, until the red matter of her grandmother was reduced to invisible bits and mixed with the dirt so as to be completely, utterly irretrievable.

II

LIUPRAND

The rain spent itself, and the clouds broke apart to show strips of hoary light. Marozia nudged Agnes meaningfully, and Agnes stepped down from the pew onto the sodden earth that infected her flesh with goosebumps. She raised a hand to help her cousin descend, and Marozia followed her down primly, nose wrinkling as her feet met the same cold ground.

“Come on, come on,” Marozia urged. “He’s going to leave.”

Marozia never *rushed*. This manner of locomotion did not befit a noble lady. But the impatience in her cousin’s voice had Agnes stumbling forward, half tripping over her muddy skirts, desperately trying to blaze a trail for Marozia, newly anointed Mistress of Teeth. It would not do for Marozia to be observed faltering and fumbling. Particularly by Thrasamund, Master of Eyes, who, congruous to his title, had the perception of a carrion bird. He steeped his hands over his stomach and watched Agnes’s awkward efforts.

Fortunately, the gray mass of guards did not move. Each stood as straight as an upright sword and, clad as they were in armor and mail, looked more metal than man.

Agnes bent down to brush some of the mud from Marozia’s skirt, taking this moment to catch her breath. From inside the mass of soldiers came a stately voice: “Part.”

No sooner had the command left the mouth of their master than the guards each took one step to the side, forming a gap through which the prince was at last revealed. Agnes stood quickly, not wanting to be perceived in such a cowed position, but when she turned her eyes

toward the prince, she had the sensation of being cowed twice over, in fact almost blinded.

It was more so the contrast between the prince's emanation and the dismal surroundings than anything innate to His Highness, though it could not be denied that he was an inordinately and surpassingly beautiful man. Gold was his hair, but a dark gold, like sunken treasure. His face appeared carved, with the adoring, if not slightly lascivious, ministrations of a master sculptor, one who took great care in shaping its aquiline nose and august brow, who caressed the statue's high, prominent cheekbones as though it were a lover.

He wore a doublet of midnight blue, banded with opulent braids of gold, a cape held to his shoulders with gilded epaulets. The prince trod the path created for him by the Dolorous Guard and stopped before Agnes and Marozia. With this proximity, Agnes could properly appreciate his stature. He was of a greater height even than Thrasamund, but he had none of the latter's adipose indulgence. His broad figure was led by bone and muscle rather than by fat and flesh. And with the grace that Thrasamund had ascribed to him earlier, he smiled down at his subjects.

"My good ladies," he said. "I did not have the occasion to meet your grandmother, but I grieve the loss of such a distinguished woman."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Marozia said. "I will endeavor to fill her slippers."

"It is a great honor to meet the new Mistress of Teeth so early in her incumbency." He turned and looked Agnes directly in the face. "And who else do I have the pleasure of meeting today?"

He was Liuprand, eldest and only son of Nicephorus the Sluggard, heir to the throne of Drepane, already well loved by his subjects, already affixed with half a dozen potential epithets: *the Golden, the Great, the Just, the Illustrious, the Fair, the Ready*. He had no reason to know her.

"My dear cousin," said Marozia, touching the small of her back. "Agnes."

"Agnes," Liuprand repeated. "You must be mourning the great old

woman as well. I have heard she was especially attached to her grandchildren. How is your heart?"

"Aggrieved, Your Highness, of course," Marozia said. She gave Agnes's back a soothing pat. "But your attendance honors our house and warms our cold spirits."

The smallest of furrows ran along Liuprand's noble brow. His eyes left Agnes briefly, flickered to Marozia, then returned to her. "And you, Lady Agnes?"

The bile of nervousness rose in her throat. The prince's gaze was not malicious, but it was probing. Quickly, before the silence could stretch on too unpleasantly, Marozia took her hand.

"Aggrieved as well, Your Highness," she said. Her voice was smooth, cloaking any strangeness the prince might have observed. It would not do to have him unnerved or suspicious. They were meant to be mending the bridges Adele-Blanche had broken, treating the old wounds she had inflicted, draining the moats she had dug around the House of Teeth.

When still Liuprand regarded Agnes in that rather puzzled manner, Marozia hastened to say, "But she, too, is cheered by your presence."

"I am glad," he said, finally lifting his eyes from Agnes's face. The furrow, however, did not disappear from his brow. "Perhaps when your grief is not so fresh, we may discuss the future of your house's relationship to the Crown."

A joyful flush filled Marozia's cheeks. "Yes," she said. "I would like that very much."

"I mean no disrespect to your grandmother's memory, of course. But with the House of Teeth under the purview of a new mistress, there may be a path forward yet untrodden."

"It is to be my first act as Mistress of Teeth," Marozia said. She squeezed Agnes's hand in a very significant way that almost hurt. "If it please Your Highness, I will visit Castle Crudele within the month to discuss these arrangements."

"It would please me very much, Lady Marozia." Liuprand nodded at her. And then he looked to Agnes again. His eyes were a water-