

Blood That Binds Ep 10 - An Apple a Day Keeps Dolan Away

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A Small Cafe

Several Weeks Later

Maeve fidgets with the drawstring on her teabag, cursing the smudged nailpolish on her left thumb. She checks her lipstick in her phone camera for the fiftieth time. At least that is still perfect, the long-lasting color-stay brand living up to its name for once, barely even leaving a stain on the teacup. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, reaching her energy down into the earth, limited by the barriers of her charm, but she is almost used to that by now. Despite the mute on her energy flow, she tries to ground and relax.

Just as she can feel tendrils of cool, brown earth magic wrapping around her own the cafe door jingles and a cold breeze sweeps in, blowing her focus away. Her eyes shoot open and lock on Rona's smile. The woman waves and points to the counter, indicating she'll be right over once she gets her drink. Maeve manages a smile in return before her gaze drops to take a sip of her tea. She glances back up through her lashes to watch the long-legged blonde take a large coffee from the barista and turn to walk towards her.

Rona is wearing high-waisted acid wash grey jeans and a houndstooth coat. She reaches the table and removes the coat to reveal a black long-sleeve tee from a band Maeve's never heard of with the neckline cut out to reveal tattoos dancing across her collarbone. Her figure looks fuller and she has more color to her skin than Maeve remembers from the last time they met face to face. Maeve can't help but find the woman even more attractive.

"Hi." Rona breaks Maeve out of her thoughts.

"Hi."

Maeve corrects her posture and tucks her hands into her lap, hiding the imperfect thumb.

"You came."

Rona takes a sip of her coffee, lips twitching in amusement.

"You called the number. Although it did take you long enough. I almost gave up on you."

"I was...nervous."

Maeve trails off, but Rona says nothing. She sits patiently, giving Maeve space to speak.

"To be honest, I haven't done *this* before...with a woman. I mean, what we did...when we met..."

Maeve blushes and Rona's eyes gain a slight twinkle, "I've done *that* before, but I haven't done actual dating."

She flounders again, eyes lowering. She begins twisting the drawstring around her mug handle.

"I mean, not that I'm assuming you want anything serious, or whatever, I just mean..."

Rona reaches out and gently places her fingertips on Maeve's hand. Maeve lets out a long breath as the energy sparks between them and she meets Rona's eyes. They are open, warm, and full of empathy. Rona leans back, removing her touch but keeping eye contact.

"So, you were nervous. What made you want to try?"

"I like you."

This simple truth falls from her lips easily as water over a ledge, and drops into her consciousness in a realization that surprises her, but feels right and comfortable.

"At least, I think I do. I know we don't know each other yet, but...I'd like to change that."

Before Rona can respond, she lets out a nervous laugh, pushing her hair back from her forehead.

"Well, there's all my cards out on the table two minutes into the first date."

Rona laughs in return and takes another drink of her coffee.

"I like it. I'm not really one to beat around the bush, if you can't already tell. So."

She crosses her legs, leaning back.

"Maeve, I would be delighted to get to know you. I think you're interesting, funny, beautiful. You're obviously very intelligent."

Maeve rolls her eyes, "Yes, I'm sure I came off as super smart while drunk off my ass dancing like a stripper."

"No, that was sexy. And confident. But there was talking before that, and after...well, after *after*...if I remember correctly."

Maeve lowers her eyes and bites her lip.

"I...don't remember correctly."

“Ouch.”

Now even Rona lowers her eyes, and the two sit in silence. Maeve’s heart pounds in her chest, and she begins tapping her foot to the rhythm of the coffee pots dripping behind the counter nearby. The sounds of the cafe fill the silence between them, and in Maeve’s head the sound grows until it feels so loud that she can’t take it anymore.

“I’m sorry, I was nervous and I drank too much and it’s something I do with girls. Not that you’re just a girl, I mean...you’re a woman and beautiful and I --”

Rona holds up her hand.

“It’s ok. Start from the beginning.”

Maeve takes a deep breath.

“I wasn’t raised...well, it’s complicated. I was raised...straight. Not everyone in my family is but...it took me a while. To figure out that I like girls, too. I mean, I guess I always knew I liked girls but I just...I thought everyone else did. I thought my straight girl friends liked girls the way I do. Because they would flirt, high school girls are always flirty with each other, you know? I didn’t realize they meant it differently than I did.”

Rona nods, “Can I ask when you started figuring it out?”

“A couple of years ago? And, since I never got those high school years to figure out how to flirt with or date anyone other than cis guys...”

“You get nervous.”

“Yes.”

The silence sits between them until Maeve breaks it again.

“Can I ask you a question? After we slept together, you sort of...snuck away. If you didn’t just want a one night stand...why did you run?”

“Maybe I wanted you to chase me.”

Maeve splutters on her tea, dripping a little on the table. She moves with quick embarrassment to wipe it up, but Rona beats her to it. She wipes up the mess and sets the napkin on the table, taking a breath and allowing Maeve to collect herself a little.

“Listen, you want my cards on the table? Nothing in this world is permanent. I’ve lost a lot of people in my life. Some of them left me, some of them I walked away from, some of them died. I don’t regret the time I had with a single one of them. I choose the people I spend my time with very carefully. So, if you and I lose each other in five minutes, or a week, or ten years, it doesn’t matter. I am here right now, getting to know you, because I want to be.”

The speech sits in the air between them for a few minutes while they search each other’s faces. Finally, with a nod, Maeve picks it up.

“Ok. So, what do you do for a living?”

“Currently, I’m a tattoo artist.”

“Really? That’s awesome. I have one on my hip that--”

“I know.”

“Oh, right...”

“It’s nice work, especially for a stick-and-poke. I haven’t done one of those in a while.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“A little of this, a little of that. My specialty is blackwork, American traditional, tribal. I do a lot of magical, spiritual stuff too.”

“People ask for that? That’s so cool. I’ve heard of magical tattoos but...I don’t know. I mean I’m a practicing witch but a tattoo seems pretty permanent.”

Rona doesn’t bat an eye at the mention of witchcraft.

“I like doing work that has extra meaning for the person it will go on. Also, if people want a lighter touch on more tender areas but they want a heavier tattoo, I’m usually who they come to. I do a lot of smaller area work as well; hands, fingers, ears.”

“Why those areas?”

“I like the challenge of working in a small space. Less room for error, less ways to work a mistake or design flaw back into the overall structure. But, what about you? You’re still in college, right?”

“Yeah, I’m an English major, but I write poetry mostly.”

“I would love to read some of it, if you would honor me with that. What do you write about?”

“How things feel...how the world...tastes.” *long breath* “That doesn’t make any sense, I know.”

Maeve shakes her head and closes her eyes for a moment. Rona waits, silent and intent. Maeve reaches out with her energy. Even with the stifling barrier caused by her protection charm, she can sense the beating heart of the little cafe. It is soft and murmuring, a soft, earthy green that pools on the tile floor, swirling around the fidgeting legs of customers as they sit or bustle in and out. She breathes in and smells the various teas, coffees, creamers and syrups that live behind the counter. On the out-breath of those scents, she speaks.

“Everything is always moving, and energy is always moving between everything, and because we’re always in motion we don’t sense the movement that goes on in all things. If we hold still, that’s when we feel it.”

She opens her eyes and reaches out to Rona, grazing the tattoos on the woman’s hand with her fingertips. Rona’s nails are no longer pointed, but trimmed short and round and smooth. Rona turns her palm and their fingers intertwine. Maeve feels the crackling of green sparks where their skin meets. She smiles.

Asim’s shop

Dolan rolls over, panting, his ginger hair sticking up and splayed in many directions, much like the dark hair on the chest it is resting on. He turns his head to look upwards at the large, bearded face, but the man still lays flat with his head resting back on the floor. The chest under Dolan’s head heaves as well. Dolan chuckles, catching his breath.

Asim raises his head to look down at the red head and smiles.

“Holy fuck, hey?”

“Indeed.”

Dolan leans up, propping himself on his elbows, and reaches for his pants. Asim rolls onto his side, holding his head up with one hand.

“You know, one of these days we’re going to make it all the way to some place with a bed, instead of just my office.”

“Ah, yes, but then what would we do on our lunch break?”

The larger man laughs, running his fingers up and down Dolan’s naked back.

“Wouldn’t it be a little more... I don’t know, romantic?”

Dolan shifts and stands up, pulling his pants on.

“I told you, I’m not available for...feelings...right now.”

“I’m pretty sure this started with feelings.”

The words hang in the air, untouched.

“You’ve lost someone. You’re grieving and you need space to do that and you’re not interested in me for anything more than what this is. I’m not an idiot. I know what this is.”

Dolan turns his face toward Asim but doesn’t speak, his face expressionless.

“But that doesn’t mean we can’t be kind to each other.”

The corner of Dolan’s mouth turns up slightly and his eyes come back into focus. He reaches a hand down to help Asim up off the floor. Asim grunts as his bearish shape topples upwards until he is in a standing position.

“Still completely baffled why you went for such an old guy like me. How old are you, anyway?”

Dolan shakes his head, his tone upbeat but sharp.

“How old are you?”

Asim shakes his head, picking his crumpled shirt up from the desk.

“Old enough not to answer that question.”

As he pulls on his own shirt, Dolan gets a text from Maeve. He checks his phone and starts to head out the door.

“Hey, where is it you sneak off to all the time? Meeting another lover?”

Asim’s tone is teasing, but his eyes are drawn in a tight wince. He reaches out to place a hand on Dolan’s arm. Dolan’s head turns sharply and he places his opposite hand around Asim’s wrist. Having not eaten since breakfast, his stores of magic are low, but he draws on them anyway. Sticky, pointed tendrils of energy prick at Asim’s hand and mouth.

“You ask too many questions, you won’t like the answers. And you’re much more sexy when you aren’t so clingy.”

Asim stumbles back in surprise as Dolan rips the larger man’s hand away from his arm with almost no effort. Dolan slams the office door behind him as he marches out into the shop, and then the street.

Maeve is waiting on the sidewalk, hands clasped in front of her legs, holding her phone. She turns to face him as he comes up the few steps to street level.

“What brings you to the neighborhood? I thought we were going to meet at home later?”

“I...thought I’d do some shopping after, so I had lunch nearby. No class until 4pm today. One of my professors is having a baby.”

“Lunch? Nothing too unhealthy, I hope?”

“No...although I did have some tea...I think it had caffeine.” Maeve fiddles again with the imperfect thumbnail, the polish now starting to peel.

“Hmmm...well I suppose it’s early enough in the day. I could use an afternoon pick-me-up.”

The tension in Maeve’s shoulders releases slightly as he continues past her. She follows him down the block into a nearby alley. The edges of the buildings lining the narrow space are mismatched at the corners, and the alley is a dead end. This provides an alcove of privacy where they can be unseen from the street.

Maeve removes her spell charm and drops it into her purse, which she sets on the ground a foot away before rolling up her sleeve to expose her inner elbow. She turns her face away and leans her head against the building beside her as Dolan moves in to feed. She winces at the slight sting of his fangs, then tries to focus on the cool, rough brick against her cheek and forehead. She imagines sinking into it, becoming the cool, strong, untouchable stone hidden here in the empty alley, left alone forever.

The next day
Umbrosia’s apartment

“So, she’s a tattoo artist. That’s hot.”

“I know, right? And...I don’t know...we’ve been on one date but I feel like I can really talk to her, like, comfortably.”

“That’s really great, hon. Where’s her tattoo parlor?”

“It’s actually...like, right above where Dolan works. We went by there today, which was convenient I guess but...”

“But what?”

“I’m just being paranoid. I met her a while after Dolan started working there, so there’s no way he could have started working there to spy on my girl....my girlfriend...”

Maeve blushes at using the word for the first time and Umbrosia reaches over to pinch her arm, smiling wide with joy for her best friend. Maeve reaches out and snags the bag of potato chips from Sia’s hand as a distraction.

“Hey! Don’t hog the good stuff!”

“Sorry, my house is totally out of junk food. Dolan does all the shopping...and cooking. He’s completely taken over my diet. It’s like I’m veal, he changes what I eat so that I taste better.”

“Girl, that’s fucked up.”

“Yeah, kind of. I mean, I’m feeling super healthy I guess. I do have to sympathize with him somewhat. Can you imagine surviving on blood for hundreds of years? Besides, since I pretty much control all of his meal times with the charm it sort of feels like an ok compromise.”

“Mmmmm....”

“What? You’ve got thoughtful face on.”

“What kind of magic did you use in that protection charm?”

Maeve squirms uncomfortably.

“Basically it’s like a wall around my body. It keeps him from being able to feed on me...as long as I don’t forget to put it on.”

Maeve rubs her inner elbow tensely, then touches the charm bottle at her neck.

“Maeve...what’s it like? Does it feel different, with it on?”

“Yeah it’s...”

Maeve drops her hands into her lap and stares at them, looking through the physical to see the aura flowing over and through them. Liquid, living light swirls in her vision in blues and violets and golds.

“When I leave it off, it’s like I’m connected to everything. I can feel everything around me, like I can just reach out and...and *know* it.”

Even focusing as hard as she can, the colors are muted. She tries to release energy out to form a bubble, a circle, a spark...anything. The energy pushes and slows, but in the end only pools in her palms as though up against a dam.

“But with the charm on, it’s like everything slows down. There’s static in my head and on my skin. I can’t feel the earth or hear the sky...”

She clenches her fists for a moment, then releases them.

“But it’s better than the alternative.”

Umbrosia reaches over across the pile of papers and their two laptops. She places her fingertips gently on Maeve’s shoulder.

“Honey, you gonna tell me what happened the other day?”

“What do you mean?”

Maeve shrugs away from her friend’s touch, and Umbrosia pulls back, but the look on her face stays open, concerned. Maeve grasps her charm in her fist while fighting the urge to touch the still healing red spot on her neck.

“At the library. In the stacks?”

“Nothing happened. I fainted, I wasn’t feeling well. It was probably just...overworking myself or...sick or something.”

“Look, you don’t have to tell me anything, ok? But you don’t have to lie to me either. I think I might already know. I want to respect your boundaries but...I’m worried about you. You’ve been acting differently lately.”

Maeve’s eyes start to well up with tears and her chest grows tight. She drops her gaze, unable to focus on anything, much less make eye contact with Umbrosia.

“It’s stupid, it’s not a big deal.”

“Ok...let me tell you what I know about ‘not a big deal’. I know that you were fine all day, until you weren’t. I know you weren’t wearing your charm that day and that I haven’t seen you take it off since. I know when I found you, you kept pulling your hair down to cover your neck. And I know that when I asked you if that was a hickey, you got very uncomfortable and said it wasn’t.”

She lets the facts sit for a few moments. Maeve doesn’t move, barely breaths. Umbrosia reaches out again, this time taking Maeve’s hand.

“And after four years, I’m pretty sure I know you. I know that something happened, and something is wrong. I know that when we met you were running from something, and I didn’t know what it was then, but now I do. It’s caught up with you, honey, and all I want to do is help.”

Hearing those words, Maeve’s breath bursts out of her in a small, violent exhale. She wraps her fingers around Umbrosia’s and gives a slight squeeze. The world still feels muted, but a dam has been opened and the words begin pouring out of her. In fits of starts and stops, she tells Umbrosia about Dolan’s loss of temper, his attack, and her attempts to be more diligent since then.

“It would have never happened if I had paid better attention to feeding him regularly.”

“Woah, it didn’t just ‘happen’, he attacked you.”

“...but, it’s not like it was the first time I forgot he had to eat. I mean, wouldn’t you get pissed off eventually, too? Plus, if I had remembered to keep my charm on, he wouldn’t have been able to bite me anyway.”

Umbrosia chews her lip for a moment, then asks cautiously, “What if you couldn’t forget to put it on? What if you couldn’t even take it off? And if there was a way to keep him off of you without limiting the flow of energy?”

She shrugs, “Sounds impossible. Why, what are you thinking?”

“Well...it’s an idea. And we would have to be super precise but...what if you did something like the protection charm, but as a tattoo? And we somehow left out the part where it dams up your magic?”

Maeve is shaking her head long before Umbrosia finishes her sentence. She crosses her arms over her chest and tucks her knees up.

“I can’t just force him to stop feeding on me. What’s the best case scenario here? That he starves to death?”

“No, the best case scenario is that it breaks the blood bond between you.”

“And worse case scenario it violates my half of the spell, raining down whatever hell my ancestors cooked up to keep everyone in line. Not to mention if he can’t feed on me he will have to feed on other people.”

“Good! Spread that burden out between other people.”

“No, you don’t get it. It’s not the blood he lives on, it’s the magic. With me, he needs a couple mouthfuls a few times a day. Without a conduit, he may need...I don’t know...gallons? Where is he going to get that? If the spell isn’t broken and I remove myself from the equation, the answer is probably my family. I don’t want that kind of blood on my hands, do you?!”

“I’m sorry, I was just trying to help.”

“Well just...don’t, ok? Until we talk to my mom, it would be great if all three of you could just stay out of this.”

Several days later
Asim’s Shop

The determined march of Sol’s combat boots contrasts with the jingling bell over the door when they march into the shop. Asim and Dolan are commiserating behind the counter over a particularly rare leather jacket with their backs to the store. Sol lands just in front of the counter, arms crossed in a wide stance. They observe the two for a moment. Dolan and Asim speak in low tones, Dolan’s deep gravel almost in harmony with Asim’s clear tenor. Asim’s eyes sparkle as he looks down at the smaller man. The large man brushes his fingers over Dolan’s arm while reaching to adjust the sleeve of the jacket. Sol is not sure whether the touch is intentional or not.

They clear their throat.

Asim startles, and both turn to face Sol. Asim’s cheeks and ears are red, but he still manages a friendly customer service greeting.

“Hello! How can we help you?”

Sol nods at Asim, but keeps their eyes on Dolan. Eyes that are full of excitement and fire.

“Hi. Do you have a minute?”

Dolan quickly steps out from behind the counter.

“Excuse me, Asim, this is my customer. They came in the other day looking for a certain item, I think I may have it in the back...”

Without touching them, Dolan escorts Sol to the back end of the store, behind a tall rack of formal wear. Sol jumps in before Dolan can even ask what they need.

“Do you eat?”

“What?”

“I mean, can you eat? Like, human food?” Sol lowers their voice.

“Yes, I can eat food. Why?”

“Well, there is magic in everything, right? And you live on magic, right?!”

“Yes...So?”

“So?! So everything! If you eat even a normal human amount of food, then you shouldn’t need as much blood from Maeve! Because you will be getting some of your magic from other things!”

“It...I mean...technically, but...”

“But what?!”

“Shhhhh!”

Dolan covers his face for a moment, then peeks through his fingers at Sol.

“The amount of magic in human foods is microscopic compared to what is in conduit witch’s blood. Three meals a day might equal, what...a teaspoon of Maeve’s blood.”

“Oh.”

Sol’s face falls, the excited light draining from their eyes, all the way down to their toes and out through the floor. It takes them only half a second to calculate the difference that would make biologically for Maeve, and the impact in miniscule. Then another idea flashes and their head pops up again.

“What if you only ate the *most* magically infused items? What if I had the food, I don’t know, infused with as much energy as I could pack into them beforehand.”

Dolan crosses his arms, looks towards the heavens for a moment, then back to Sol. He sighs.

“Well, I suppose we could try it. At the very least it may help tide me over between meals when Maeve’s schedule gets...random.” He scowls playfully, “But I warn you, a blood diet is much less appealing when you remember what real food tastes like, so this food had better be damned good.”

One week later
Maeve’s Apartment

“So, we’re going to bless the food?”

“Yes, that’s the idea. As much energy as you can pack into it.”

“But won’t Maeve be eating some of this food?”

“Well, there’s not really a good way to keep it separate. Also, it probably won’t hurt Maeve to be eating blessed food as well.”

“Got it.”

Noam continues to pull food out of the cupboards and set them on the center island.

“Oh, wait, this one isn’t kosher.” He sets a package of bacon jerky off to the side near Sol.
“Damnit.”

“You can swear and drink but you can only bless kosher food?”

Noam takes a long pause, brow furrowed at the bacon.

“I...don’t know.”

Sol rolls their eyes and pulls another bag of lettuce out of the fridge.

“What?! I’m not a *Mequbbāl*. Even if I was, I’m pretty sure there’s not exactly a 101 course on imbuing food with magic to feed a vampire!”

“Yeah? Well there’s not exactly a Biology 101 course on how much magic it takes to keep a vampire from making your friend anemic, but I’m improvising.”

When the food is sorted, Sol moves their half into the living room. They pull the coffee table off to one side and order all of the food into one central, circular pile. Taking a ball of red twine out of their bag, they begin to unravel it. Each end is tied to a palm-sized hag stone, one black and one white.

Beginning at the south end of the pile and moving clockwise, they lay the string around the pile in a circular border. When they reach the south end again, there is enough room between the two stones for Sol to kneel facing inwards with the black stone in their left hand and the white stone in their right, completing the circle.

Getting comfortable, Sol sits back on their heels, closes their eyes and begins a series of rapid breaths, emphasizing the outbreath each time. After several minutes, their eyes flutter open. Sol's eyes are unfocused, as though in a trance. They release the rapid breath and breathe in deeply, then out slowly three times, before they begin swaying back and forth slightly. Eyes still unfocused, they begin to chant quietly under their breath, asking for blessings and drawing energy into the food within the circle. They whisper of dark and light and not-quite-either things, of life and death and space between.

Meanwhile, Noam performs his own blessing ceremony. He sets up his pile of food on the kitchen island. The food takes up almost the entire counter space, giving him very little room to work within. He starts by popping on a chunky set of headphones and starting a low-toned meditative playlist. On each of the four sides of the table he places an item from his pocket: a stone, a feather, a shell, and finally his phone - the screen lit up with a high-quality gif of a candle flame.

Standing facing the table, he slips off his beaded bracelet and begins to pray under his breath, counting each prayer on a bead before moving onto the next.

Both of their blessing rituals underway, the apartment takes on a hushed and weighty feel. Energy gathers around each altar space, swirling inwards down and down into the food items. Each witch is completely focused on their task, all of their intention summoning and directing that energy. The only light in the apartment comes in from the living room windows and Noam's artificial candle. The only sound is the soft murmuring of two whispering prayers.

It is this scene that Dolan wanders in on about ten minutes later. He stands quietly near the door until the two finish their ceremonies, dismantling the sacred spaces they had created in the reverse order that they set them up. Sol startles when they notice Dolan, and nearly drop the bundle of string they are wrapping up around the two hag stones. Noam pops out his headphones and stares down at the food overflowing on the kitchen island. The three say nothing at first, just exchanging eye contact around and around in an uneasy triangle.

"Did it work? Do you think we got enough...magic in it?" Noam asks.

Sol shrugs, "Only one way to find out."

Both sets of eyes land on Dolan. Casually, he plucks an apple from the kitchen island. He extends his fangs and raises it to his mouth to take a large bite. The juice clings slightly, forming a single droplet on his lower lip. Crunching down on the bite of fruit, Dolan raises his eyebrows and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Mouth still full, he nods and says,

"Not bad."

Without further ceremony, he takes another bite and retreats to his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Noam and Sol stand flabbergasted for a moment, then sigh and begin putting the food away. When they are finished and heading out the door, Dolan appears suddenly in the kitchen, disposing of his apple core. He calls after them just as the door begins to swing shut.

“Same time next week!”