

Blood That Binds Ep 2 - My Roommate, the Vampire

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Pittsburgh, Present Day

A few days later

Maeve's alarm blares her awake and she rolls out of bed, knocking her phone off the side table before she can reach the button to make the squawking stop. As she rubs her eyes and tugs up her sleep shorts, her nose tells her that breakfast is already cooked and ready for her in the kitchen, again.

"How the hell do you do that?" She rounds into the kitchen a moment later, hands on her hips.

"Do what?" Dolan turns from the stove as though caught in the act of something naughty. The spatula held delicately in a yellow oven mitt is an unlikely accessory to his usual black skinny jeans and tank top, which has a faded white smiley face printed in an imitation graffiti style.

"You have breakfast ready exactly when I get up every morning, no matter what time I get up." She sits at the kitchen island and grabs a piece of bacon from the plate set for her, "And don't tell me you have my alarm memorized already, because for one thing you've only been here like three days, plus my schedule at the cafe has been all blown to hell lately anyway. The first time was awesome, now it's getting weird"

"Shush and eat your bacon," he sets a cup of coffee in front of her, hoping it will distract from this line of conversation "And speaking of the cafe, how many extra coffees did you have yesterday? I was wired all night."

"I'm a college student, I'm supposed to bleed espresso," She says, still chewing her bacon, and punctuates the sentence with another sip of coffee, "God, that's good coffee. And you barely sleep anyway."

He slips into the stool across from her, "Yes well please try to remember that anything you take in I'm getting as well. Now I don't want to control what you eat but I think I have some right to what I put into my body,"

She wrinkles her upper lip in disgust, "You're like living with a cross between a personal trainer and an anti-abortionist. I may be feeding you but I still have bodily autonomy."

"Yes well it's hard not to make suggestions when I can just about hear the chemical sludge pounding through your veins every morning," he mumbles the end of his sentence into a glass of water and takes a deep drink.

Her eyes widen suddenly and she stops mid-chew, waving a piece of bacon at him in accusation, "You son of a bitch!" She swallows the bacon roughly, "You listen to my breathing. My circadian rhythms, that's how you know when I'm going to wake up."

He nearly chokes on his water, then after a pause lets his orange-red hair fall in front of his eyes sheepishly, "Maybe." He raises his hand to cut her off before she can protest further, "In my defense, when was the last time you ate this well?"

"Don't pretend this is for me. You only care that I'm healthy because it means I taste better." She swallows down the dregs of her coffee. He lowers his hand in defeat. She narrows her eyes at him and crunches on the last piece of bacon. As she stands and heads toward the bathroom to get ready for work she tosses over her shoulder, "You're lucky I'm a starving college student and haven't had a real home cooked meal in years."

He chuckles, then stands and begins cleaning up the dishes. The muffled sounds of water running and music playing from Maeve's phone leak through the walls. Everything about the apartment smells like magic to him, but especially the kitchen. To the untrained eye it is fairly standard for a college apartment; not much food, several half-empty bottles of cheap alcohol sitting on top of the fridge. The food that does fill the refrigerator and cupboards is mostly microwavable or just-add-water. Dishes are secondhand, mismatched, or disposable.

Evidence of Maeve's practice is subtle, but clear to one who has lived with witches in hiding for the past 400 years. In addition to an entire cabinet of herbs (with a small, high shelf marked "Baneful" in permanent marker and masking tape) there are braids of garlic hanging from the ceiling over the counter, two separate mortar and pestle sets, little scraps of paper sigils in every corner of the apartment, and various other pagan symbols in paintings and knickknacks everywhere he looks. There is even a small triune goddess figurine and incense burner on the coffee table in the living room, with a few other items around it suggesting it might be an altar.

He surveys all this mentally as he washes up the dishes, smiling to himself. Yes, she may have left the family coven years ago but she is definitely still practicing. He can taste it on her.

Maeve comes out of the bathroom, fully dressed in a barista uniform but with her hair still wet, phone in her hand.

"Damnit." She mumbles. "I'm gonna be late. Again."

"Should I start waking you in the morning so you get up earlier?" Dolan asks, wiping his hands dry on a dish towel.

Maeve shoves her phone under her arm and clamps it to her side, using both hands to scrunch her damp hair into some sort of shape. "You're my roommate, not my butler." She shoves her phone into her back pocket and sticks out her arm impatiently.

Dolan sighs, "You know I have hardly had a sit-down meal since I got here?"

Maeve puts her other hand on her hip, trying to ignore the sizzling connection under her skin and the rolling hunger in her gut despite having just eaten. "You know it freaks me out when you refer to me as food, right?"

Dolan takes her arm and starts to lean over it, then stops and straightens up. His fangs have extended to glisten against his lower lip, "I'm just saying, you got to sit down, relax and enjoy your breakfast..."

"Yeah, that's why I'm late!" She wiggles her arm and brings it towards his face.

He pulls away, taking her arm gently and lowering it below her heart before bending to lick and sink his fangs into her vein. The magic releases slowly, and Maeve struggles not to fidget and tap her foot. After nearly a minute he closes the wound and straightens, awkwardly releasing her arm. She steps back from him and snaps up her phone then begins searching for her purse.

"It goes faster if you relax." Dolan tucks his hands into his back pockets, eyes following her around the room.

She looks up at him, confused for a moment, then realization dawns on her face. She nods vaguely and turns around, still unable to find the purse.

He rolls his eyes and gestures to the living area. "Check under the futon."

Her top half bobs down, instantly spotting the black satchel-like purse. She grabs it and straightens, heading towards the door.

"Are you coming home for lunch?" He calls as she opens the door.

"Yeah!" She yells back, shutting the door behind her.

Urgent footsteps carry her along a short hallway and down a few flights of steps. Her eyes stay on her phone until she exits the building into the open air. It's a short walk to the bus stop, and she just catches the bus as it is pulling up. She swipes her card and takes a seat, popping her headphones in for the ten minute ride. She scrolls through the audio tracks on her phone until she finds the recorded lecture, and picks up where she left off the night before.

"...from an anthropological standpoint, the phenomena of creating a common spiritual narrative is essential to build connections and community, and therefore essential to the rise of civilizations. What that doesn't entirely explain, however, is the theme of connecting to spiritual -- what some now call metaphysical energy in the world around us or in other worlds, whether

that is a singular universal entity or a collection of smaller spirits -- through ecstatic means. That is, why humans 'journey' and what they bring back with them is not entirely explained from a community-building standpoint..."

Maeve pulls a small notebook and pen from her purse and scribbles little bullet points as she listens.

Back in the apartment, Dolan bluetooths his phone to the stereo and cranks a modern indie cover of a popular 70's hit. He then heads into the bathroom, swinging his hips back and forth to the music as he pulls his toothbrush and toothpaste from a shelf inside the mirrored cupboard. Raising his upper lip, he grimaces and extends his fangs, then begins to brush. He pays special attention to the area around his incisors. After a few minutes he spits into the sink, staining it with a bloody but minty fresh foam. He flosses, rinses and heads back to his room.

Flopping down onto the bed, Dolan spends several minutes on different job search websites. Not finding anything interesting, he gets up and paces around, opening and closing drawers. They are painfully sparse, in addition to his jacket there are only the extra socks, underwear and tank top he'd carried rolled up in his pocket. Most of what he owned in Michigan was probably thrown out or donated the moment he left. Other than his magical recoloring of the walls, the entire room is fairly bare.

His mind wanders to Maeve's refrigerator calendar and the red circled day noted, "RENT DUE", along with the school loan deferment letter which she had conveniently left on the kitchen counter for him with the loan amount highlighted in yellow. He fishes under his bed and pulls out a shoebox.

Inside is a large wad of money and a small embroidery hoop holding a handkerchief. Embroidered on it are the words, "Remember me. Love, Linda." The words are encircled by the beginnings of a heart, but the work is unfinished. The threaded needle still sticks into the cloth. He runs his fingers over the embroidery and lifts the fabric to his nose. He takes a long inhale with his eyes closed before setting it aside to flip through the stack of cash.

There is quite a bit of money there, but not enough to cover a new wardrobe and what he'd promised Maeve -- monthly rent along with her first semester's tuition up front. Money was something else he'd lost with Linda's death, as all the bank accounts had transferred to her two daughters. In his 400 years on earth, the use of electronic records keeping was the most inconvenient modernization when it came to keeping his identity a secret. Getting a fake ID was one thing, but social security numbers, birth certificates, death certificates...all were a lot more costly, either in the magic it took to glamour people or the money it took to bribe them. He hadn't had his own bank account in over half a century. Linda's death had been unexpected, so he hadn't had a chance to stockpile a larger amount of cash.

With a sigh, he puts the contents back in the box and stows it away. Then he pulls up his job search again, but almost immediately swipes the app off his phone screen in frustration. He grabs his keys and a jacket, shoves his phone in his pocket and heads out of the apartment.

A little while later, Dolan wanders down one of Pittsburgh's downtown side streets. He breathes deeply through his nostrils, sifting through the scents, not sure what he's looking for. A whiff of something old and familiar brings him to a halt. Popping his earbuds out, he turns to his right. At street level, a large window looks in on a tattoo parlor. Down a short flight of steps just beyond that, there is an unassuming door with tidy but worn green paint. The sign above it reads, *Fasih Fashion & Vintage*. A paper flyer taped to the window announces, *Now hiring, inquire within*.

Stepping quickly down on the balls of his feet, Dolan turns the door handle and walks inside. His entrance is announced by the jingle of a small bell. The store is larger than he would have expected, crowded with racks of clothing and several bins of records. The space smells to him as though every decade from the 60s through the early 90s is having a convention. It isn't the scent he picked up from the street, but he is distracted almost immediately from that thought by a very short figure with racoon-like eyeliner, black and white streaked hair and a very large attitude glaring daggers at him through coke bottle glasses.

"Take a picture, weirdo, it will last longer." The teenager pops her gum at him and he raises an eyebrow at her before turning towards the rack of jewelry on the checkout counter.

"Zarilla, I don't pay you to harass the customers." A large man steps out of a back room to stand behind the counter.

The man has to be well on his way to six and a half feet tall with a toned barrel chest, thick muscular limbs and a bit of a belly to round it all out. His visible skin is covered in a combination of dark tattoos and darker hair, including a well-kept beard and mustache. He has an uncountable number of earrings as well as a nose piercing. The hair on his head and in his beard are just starting to turn grey, matching his silver-blue eyes.

"Don't mind her, she's just got an attitude because schools' started and she can't work as many hours." He smiles at Dolan, who continues to approach. The girl rolls her eyes and heads for the back of the store. "Welcome, Asim Al-Fasih." The store owner reaches out to shake Dolan's hand.

"Hello there." Dolan's grin spreads slowly across his face as he takes the hand of the beautiful goliath in front of him. "Dolan."

"Looking for anything in particular?"

“Yes, actually. A job and some new clothes.” He trails his fingers along the counter’s edge.
“How lucky for me that you offer both...and more.”

Asim tucks his beefy hands into his front pockets, “Do you have any experience in retail?
People that come in here tend to like to bargain.”

Dolan smirks and looks around the store, “I can talk someone into a sale. I’m told I’m very
persuasive...some would even say charming.”

The man lets out a chuckle, “Yes, I can see that. Well, I can grab an application for you from the
back.”

He begins to turn away, but Dolan catches his hand. Locking on Asim’s eyes, he wraps a tendril
of energy from his fingertips up the man’s arm and into his ear. The man shivers as the warm,
wet, invisible energy tickles his earlobe.

“I don’t think that will be necessary.” Dolan says calmly, “I think you find me *very* charming and
want very much to give me this job without any silly paperwork that might require...identification.
You would rather pay me cash.”

Asim nods and smiles, blinking slowly, “Of course, I understand. You’re in a difficult position and
need to work under the table. You’re not the first young kid I’ve helped out.”

Dolan nods back, “Exactly, thank you Asim.” He pauses and adds, “While we’re at it, I think
you’d better give me my first two week’s pay today, since I’m going through such a hard time,
and let me take a few things to supplement my wardrobe.”

“I’ll get your cash right away, and feel free to grab whatever catches your eye from the store.”

Dolan releases Asim’s hand and gaze, “Are you sure? That’s very generous of you. I can start
work tomorrow, of course.”

Asim raises his hands as he turns towards the back office again, “No, I insist. I know what it’s
like to go through a rough time when you’re young. Besides, you need a uniform.”

Dolan turns to a rack and begins looking through t-shirts with obscure band logos. “Almost too
easy.” He mumbles to himself, then looks up suddenly to see Zarilla’s glasses reflecting at him
like two bright disks of light from across the store. He raises one hand and waggles his fingers
at her, then returns to his perusal.

Maeve staggers back through the apartment door several hours later, sweating and exhausted. When she arrived at work, the morning rush had already started. With a quick apology to her manager she had ducked behind the counter...and hadn't stopped moving since. The usual mid-morning lull never seemed to come. When she finally finished the bus routes were disrupted by protestors and she had walked home almost ten blocks.

She marches directly to the shower to rinse off and change from her sweat-soaked polo and black barista pants to a much cooler pair of jean shorts and mustard-yellow cotton t-shirt. She twists her hair up into a ponytail and, feeling much cooler, pads in bare feet to her apothecary. Gathering dried lemon balm and a small slice of fresh ginger, she makes her way over to the coffee table.

Maeve pulls a pillow down from the futon and sits, her ankles pressing into her calves and the floor in contrast with the soft stuffing under her backside. She places her ingredients carefully in the goddess offering bowl and takes a lighter and incense cone from a drawer under the table top. The incense cone she settles in a tea-light sized citrine holder near the goddess statue and lights it. Smoke rises lazily, wafting over her with soothing orange and clove scent. Reaching for her phone, she puts on a calm, focusing playlist and closes her eyes.

After several deep breaths, her hands raise softly in front of her chest. Eyes still closed, she channels her energy to them, focusing patiently until she can see in her mind's eye the glowing orange-yellow energy coursing over the backs of her hands and between her fingers to pool in her palms. Slowly, the pool of light grows, and she can feel her energy level rising. She pours a small amount into the offering bowl, eyes still closed, and can see it splash around the ginger and lemon balm. Maeve raises her cupped hands into the air, ready to pour the cool, clean, pure energy back over and into herself.

Just then, the door clicks and shoves open. Maeve's eyes snap wide, her view of the energy field quickly fades. Dolan's voice booms out an off-key punk rock solo, oblivious that he has just interrupted her ritual. On his next intake of breath before a particularly sharp and long crescendo the warm citrus scent of her magic hits him and he falls silent.

Only then does Maeve turn towards him. With one hand he pulls a set of headphones from his ears. The other hand holds a brown paper bag of groceries. Both arms are slung with several other large bags of clothing.

"Oh, sorry." He smiles at her and twirls the headphones, "I love these things. It's amazing how the options for experiencing entertainment have revolutionized in the past century." He turns and sets the bags on the kitchen island. "It seems like just yesterday that the only way to listen to music was if you knew someone who could play an instrument."

Maeve sighs and stands, placing the cushion back on the futon. "Are you sure you don't miss listening to monks chanting in stone castles?" She wanders slowly into the kitchen.

"That's the beauty of it, I can listen to everything from monk-chants to ballet scores, ancient Japanese poetry to hip-hop all in a few seconds." He begins unpacking the groceries - mostly consisting of fresh vegetables.

"Yes," She smirks, "I'm aware of how the internet works."

"Oh, by the way, here's the rent money."

Maeve takes the offered roll of bills and shoves it in her back pocket without counting it. She turns to the cupboard and pulls out a vanilla pudding cup, then retrieves a spoon from the silverware drawer.

"Oh, no, don't eat that."

"Excuse you?"

"I brought you a healthy lunch. I was going to cook but then I found this delightful little vegan place..." He pulls out a brown cardboard takeout container and sets it on the island in front of her.

The lid is stamped with the words: *100% Recycled. Biodegradable. Sustainable and Cruelty-Free.*

"Do you like vegan? You're Aunt Linda went vegan for a while a couple of years ago. It tasted delicious." He pats the container lid, grinning.

Maeve curls her lip. Flipping the lid of the container open with the tip of her spoon, she eyes the mix of vegetables and tofu with skepticism, then slowly and silently closes it. She gives it a little tap with the spoon as if the food might come alive and try to sneak out.

Dolan frowns, "Don't you like vegan?"

"I like pudding." Maeve forces a smile and rips the lid off her pudding cup in one jerk

"Oh, come on. That stuff is all sugar." Dolan nudges the vegan food a little closer to her. "You could at least try it. You said you'd be home for lunch and I made sure to have something ready for you." His lower lip droops out ever so slightly and his forehead wrinkles.

She defiantly plunges the spoon into the cup, then into her mouth. "This is just to make sure I don't pass out on the way there." She says around a mouthful of pudding, covering her face with the back of her hand, then swallows. "I'm eating after this with a friend. We have a study date before class."

Dolan's frown deepens and his long nails tap on the countertop. "But...you said, you'd be home for lunch."

"Yeah, your lunch. Not mine." She shakes the spoon at him and takes another bite.

He leans against the refrigerator, arms resting on his chest and one leg crossed over the other at the shins. "I went to the trouble of getting you this lunch." His voice is firm, slow, as though the child simply doesn't understand.

Maeve scrunches up her eyebrows at him, "Yeah, and I went to the trouble of regenerating blood cells for you. And you interrupted my meditative ritual when you came in, so all the energy I drew up to refresh myself spiritually was just...wasted."

Dolan draws back from the unexpected attack, rocking away from her on his heels, clearly offended. He inhales deeply, taking intentional notice of the scent of incense and her magic cloying at his nose. Immediately his eyes start to glow and fangs protrude from his upper lip. A rock of hunger drops in the pit of Maeve's stomach.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

He shakes his head, slowly slipping his hands into his front pockets with a shrug, "You didn't ground. That energy didn't release, it's sitting in your veins." Dolan's mouth waters. The hunger rises like bile in both of their stomachs.

Maeve's face begins to redden, her jaw juts out, then she releases a long, slow breath. They stand for a moment in silence. She finishes the pudding cup, but it does nothing to quell the hunger laying heavy in her abdomen. Maeve tosses the empty plastic and spoon in the sink and sits at the kitchen island with a thud. When she does speak, it's in a quieter tone.

"This...ache..." She places a fist on her stomach, eyes on the table, "Is this what you feel?"

The tension in his shoulders relaxes slightly. He takes his hands from his pockets and leans with one elbow on the island. "That, and other things. Dizzy, sometimes. Mad. Like the noise in my head gets too loud and I'm going to just...fade away into it." The corners of his mouth twitch. "Of course, we Fae live peering off the edge of sanity."

"All the time?"

He shakes his head, drawing patterns on the countertop with his index nail, "No, not always. Not with Linda." He gazes off the tip of his nose into a far-away place. After a moment, he returns his eyes to Maeve. They are still glowing. "In the beginning, of course, it's almost always like this. Getting used to a new...partnership. I've done it almost a dozen times, but...Each person

has their own energy. It's like learning to resist hunger all over again. Besides the practical side, learning to get along, learning each other's patterns."

"A dozen times..." Maeve contemplates the words. "I mean, I knew it was 400 years. I guess I didn't think about you developing these...feeding relationships with that many people." She shakes her head, "I guess mom never really wanted to talk to me about our family heritage. Even though I'm the one inheriting it."

"Yes...Eliza has been very...discriminate about what she permitted me to tell you." He reaches up to scratch the back of his head. "But, there's no reason you shouldn't know now. Tell me what you already know, I'll fill in the gaps."

"Well...I know the binding ritual happened in the 1600s. During the witch trials?" She shrugs, "I know our family didn't feel like they had any other options. You came to Scotland and made a deal with my however-many-great grandmother. Protection in exchange for food."

Dolan nods, "Those are the basics of it. I was cursed to come to earth years before that. Your great-great-etcetera grandmother was a very powerful conduit of magic. She and her coven had been successfully hiding their continued practice of paganism for quite some time."

"But something changed?" Maeve props her chin up on her hand.

"Yes. She got pregnant out of wedlock. The local villagers started whispering that she would give birth to a demon."

"Seriously?" She leans back in disgust. "I'm in this mess because a bunch of assholes slut-shamed my ancestor?"

"That and the fears the church and the witch hunters were spreading. Everyone was eager to point the finger at someone else lest they be drowned or burned themselves. It was becoming harder for me to hide as well, without a steady food source. Many non-conduits had stopped practicing even the smallest folk magics and I had to drink... a lot more than normal... just to survive." Dolan shakes his head, "Long story short, we realized we would hide better together. Your family line would feed me, and I would use my glamour and strength to keep us both from being burned by witch hunters."

"Mom always made it sound a lot more...one-sided than that."

"Yes well...that is her perspective."

Maeve contemplates him a moment, then pulls out the stool next to her, patting it's seat. Dolan raises an eyebrow at her.

“Sit down.” She insists, and he complies hesitantly.

“What are you doing?”

Maeve pulls the takeout box closer to her, fishing in the brown bag for utensils with one hand as she holds her other arm out to him. She raises a bite of the vegan food to her mouth and gives him a grim smile.

“Having a goddess-damned sit-down meal.”

He smiles back, his fangs flashing, “Language.” He chides just before sinking them into her.

Half an hour later, Maeve slams her bag and her body into an occupied booth in a well-lit bistro. A frizzy halo crowns her with warm rain droplets clinging to the hair on her head and bare arms. She’s barely sat down when she snatches the occupant’s smoothie and sucks down a large sip. She tips her head back, allowing the sweet, cool drink to coat her mouth and wash away the stale taste of tofu.

“Hello to you, too.” The woman across from her raises an eyebrow as she retrieves her smoothie and firmly sets it back in place on the table, crowded carefully between a textbook, two notebooks and some loose printed power-point slides. “You can order your own, you know. They ain’t gonna run out any time soon.”

Maeves shakes her head, regretting the mild brain freeze she’s just given herself more than stealing her best friend’s drink. “Sorry, I had to get the taste of vegan out of my mouth.”

“Since when do you eat vegan?” The woman raises her upper lip to match her eyebrow in mild disgust.

“I don’t. And now I remember why.” Maeve begins pulling books and notes from her bag, adding them to the already messy pile spread across most of the table. “Any updates from the rest of the group?”

“Noam actually had an interesting idea, but I think it needs to be fleshed out.” She pulls a bound notebook from under two text books and flips it open, the pages whooshing crisply against each other.

“Ok, hit me with it.”

“Well, you know we’re pretty much the only people in the class who seriously practice magic. Other than, like, the ones who just bought the witchy starter packs from the mall or whatever.”

Umbrosia's hair bobs gracefully as she articulates with not only her hands, but most of her upper body.

"Yeah, the 'hashtag aesthetic, hashtag witches'" Maeve nods and opens up a notebook with a roll of her eyes.

"Right." Umbrosia adjusts her bandana, pushing her afro back slightly from her forehead. "So we can offer a unique perspective on actual practitioners in the modern age. There have to be other witches in the city, maybe even a few other serious ones on campus. If we can get ahold of them, we could develop some kind of qualitative survey of their experiences."

Maeve nods, jotting down a few notes. "Ok, but that's a pretty wide swath. What are we looking into? 'Witch' is such a broad term, it's going to be hard to qualify their experiences in a survey short enough that we could actually get people to take it."

"That's true." Umbrosia leaves through her text book with a sigh, then looks up suddenly. "Have you finished listening to the lecture yet?"

"Almost. Why?" Maeve looks up as well, reaching slowly towards Sia's smoothie again.

"What if we didn't focus on specifics." She swats Maeve's hand away. "What if we took the broader anthropological spiritual themes, especially the unexplained similarities across cultures, and see if they still apply to our survey subjects."

With an inner sigh, Maeve reaches for the menu tucked under their piles of papers and starts glancing through it with one hand as she continues making notes with the other. "What? You mean like energy work? Anthropomorphized spirits? Wouldn't that just confirm that they're coming from a long history of socially enforced belief in deity?"

"Sure, but if we focused on their experiences instead of their beliefs...especially if we got enough people from different traditions, different backgrounds..." Sia trails off and shrugs as Maeve looks around for a waiter. "I know, it's way too much work for a 2-credit elective class. But it's also the last class we will all have together for a while. And this project is, like, two-thirds of our grade."

"It's a good idea." Maeve smiles as a waiter catches her eye and makes his way over. "At least it gives us somewhere to start, and it sounds a lot more interesting than spending the night in some cheesy fake haunted house."

"Hey, some of us believe in ghosts, you know." The woman takes a long drink of her smoothie.

"Sure but it's usually the house itself that is upset in my experience--" Maeve is cut off as the waiter arrives to take her order.

When he leaves, her friend dives back into the debate, her voice softer but taking a higher pitch.

“You don’t believe in ghosts, but you think a building can have hurt feelings?”

Maeve snatches Sia’s smoothie and takes a long sip, smile creeping out around the straw.

Oh, Umbrosia. I don’t think. I know.