

## **Blood That Binds Ep 4 - A Shitty, Cliche Vampire Story**

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*The Streets of Pittsburgh*

*The next day, Saturday*

Maeve strides along the sidewalk, earbuds in to drown out the sound of cars rolling past on the one-way street, most likely searching in vain for parking. A smile flickers around her eyes at that thought. It's mid-afternoon, well after the lunch rush, but she's not in the mood to say hello to any strangers and the headphones provide a good buffer. Her steps are long in low wedges and a short floral jumper. Her wavy brown hair whips around her face as she turns down another side street and into the wind. A small satchel purse hangs secure across her torso and thumps gently against her thigh with every step, causing the jumper to ride up on that side. With mild irritation, she tugs it down every four or five steps. Finally she reaches her destination and without looking around turns sharply down a narrow alley.

She only takes a step or so off the street. There isn't much in the alley, mostly cigarette butts, a discarded vape pen and some faded wrappers. She takes no notice of this, just glances down the alley to make sure no one is lurking in the shadows. Pulling the earbuds out she drops them into her satchel and turns to face the red sandstone building beside her. She closes her eyes, slows her breathing and listens to the sounds of the city around her. After a few moments she gently places her palm on one of the large stones that make up the building. This is one of the older buildings in the city so the stones are well worn by over a century of polluted rain. The building is large, but not so large to ignore her presence. She is standing less than a foot from the wall and within seconds presses her forehead to the stone as well. It is cooler here in the alley than it would be on the side facing the street.

Anyone walking by might think she is crying or hungover, but she can't think of that. She must focus. Slowly, she visualizes pushing her magic out into the building like a handshake. It takes several breaths before she receives any response. After all, the building is big and old and probably not used to witches. When she does feel a response, it is a gruff but curious energy and she feels as though she has walked into the office of one of the great industrialists of the city's history. She just hopes her request won't be considered too petty. Sensing the entity respects efficiency, she focuses on a clear, concise request.

*I want a gift of strength and protection.* She also visualizes a few grains of the sandstone falling into her open palm, glowing brightly with protective energy.

The energy takes a few moments to respond. Refusing to let her thoughts wander, she repeats the request patiently in her mind. Eventually she feels an energetic response. The stone under her palm feels gritty, as though a few grains have presented themselves as looser than others. The building spirit's attitude is dismissive, but acquiescing, as though waving a hand at her and saying, "Yes, fine, fine. Now be on your way."

Slowly she flutters her eyes open and reaches into her purse with her free hand, pulling out a small but sturdy swiss army knife; her multi-use athame. She flicks out the file and with her other hand rummages for a wide-necked glass bottle. The bottle is tiny, about the size of her thumb. Scraping enough dust from the stone and actually getting it in the bottle is a tricky task, but after a few minutes she has succeeded in gathering enough to at least coat the bottom. Finishing up, she resheaths the file and corks the bottle, settling both back into the purse. Again she places her hand on the wall and sends a strong burst of energy.

*Thank you.*

From her purse she pulls out her offering; a vintage late-1800s glass button. It was the oldest, most appropriate thing she could find in her trinkets. She leaves it carefully tucked into a crack at the base of the building, near it's cornerstone, and then strides on down the street, looking for all the world like any normal person.

*The Apartment*  
*Early that evening*

Dolan walks down the hall to the apartment with slow, dragging steps. Different versions of the upcoming conversation roll around in his mind, each one making him cringe slightly. Still, he squares his shoulders, knowing it cannot and should not be avoided. He has to speak with her, to make her see reason and clean up this mess, before she gets a chance to run off and avoid him again.

He had woken late that morning to a rough tap on his shoulder and Maeve's bare arm in his face. He didn't usually sleep much, and rarely deeply, but his body had needed rest to purge the alcohol from his system. Maeve's magic smelled intense and the scowl on her face did not encourage conversation.

"Hurry up, I've got shit to do." She'd said, thrusting her arm at him.

"Language." He'd muttered under his breath before taking her arm tenderly and breaking his fast.

She'd rushed out the moment he finished, barely giving him time to close the wound, much less apologize again for his bad behavior. He'd gone out to explore the city, something he had been doing often since he arrived. He particularly enjoys strolling through the grungier, old industrial sections of the city. There are fewer people to smell and listen to.

He now returns to the apartment early in the evening, unlocking the door to find Maeve cleaning up spell items from the island countertop. She looks up slightly startled as he opens the door, then after a pause returns abruptly to her task.

He locks the door behind him and slowly approaches, hands in his back pockets and shoulders slumping in a boyish fashion. He shuffles for a moment as though to take off his worn, black jacket but decides to keep it on and winds up just fiddling with the zipper. The only sounds in the silence are lids clunking onto reused spice bottles, glass jars clinking and the hum of the AC unit in the living room window.

After a few moments he decides to break the silence and takes a deep inhale. Whatever sentence he was about to utter is stopped cold and he narrows his eyes, then widens them. In the blink of an eye he is at her side, snatching at a tiny bottle on the table then turning to sniff her like one would a child who lies about having bathed. All thoughts of tenderness and reasoning flee from his mind.

“A protection charm?! Really?” He spits out scornfully. He pinches the cord tied around the bottle’s neck, lifting it up without touching the bottle itself. His long nails are accentuated above the blue glass and red wax that seals the cork. Even without touching the bottle itself, he can feel tendrils of icy energy reaching up to prick and burn at his fingers.

Maeve nearly jumps out of her skin at his sudden supernatural movement. Nostrils flaring, snatches the bottle out of his grasp. He relinquishes it easily, rubbing his stinging fingers against his jacket. She wraps her hand around the necklace tightly, concealing it completely in her palm.

“How did you guess?” She tilts her head up slightly to look literally down her nose at him.

“I didn’t guess.” He crosses his arms, sullen. “Your magic reeks of it.” He raises his upper lip in disgust and wipes his hand on his jeans.

She smirks, “Good. That means it’s working, and stronger than I hoped.” She slips the cord around her neck, tucking the bottle down her jumper and giving it a pat, then turns from him to carefully reshelve her apothecary.

“It’s unnecessary, is what it is. I understand we slipped up last night, we made a mistake.” In an attempt to regain his calm, he leans against the fridge, waving the incident away with one hand before crossing his arms again, “And this childish response is just...inconvenient.”

A glass bottle thuds heavily down on the counter and Maeve whirls around to face him.

“*INCONVENIENT* my ass!” She takes a threatening step towards him and he leans back slightly, “You want to talk inconvenient? How about sharing my apartment - my *life* - with a vampire?!”

“That word is hurtful and unnecessary. Besides, I’m family and I’m paying your tuition and half of rent. You could show a little gratitude,” He wags a finger at her patronizingly.

"I do, literally in my own blood!" She slaps her arm like an addict gearing up for smack.

"Oh don't be dramatic. So we had a slip up. These things happen. We can't be expected to fall into each other's schedules after just two weeks. Why, it took your aunt and I --"

"No!" She swipes her hand through the air to cut him off. "Absolutely you do not get to compare your relationship with Linda to our arrangement. Ever!"

"Why not?" He wrinkles his forehead with genuine confusion.

"Because you were fucking her! She was your blood-lust thrall, and that is not going to be me," Maeve grabs a rag and furiously wipes the counter of the little bits of herbs that escaped her charm.

"Of course not, you're like a niece to me, practically a daughter." He pauses and interrupts himself, realization dawning on his face, "Oh, is that what this is about?"

"Linda? Yes it very much fucking is--" She flaps the rag back into its place hanging from the stove handle, but he talks over her before she can continue.

"Listen, I know it might be awkward having a father-figure living with you at this stage in your life. You want to sow your wild oats and party, have boyfriends or girlfriends or whatever. Please, don't let me get in your way. I may be 500 years old but I am more than aware of what it means to hang a sock on the door," he chuckles with a knowing grin.

Maeve pauses in revolted disbelief, then pinches the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger, "I don't get to have significant others, or even just normal friends, because of you." Her voice starts off low but quickly gains volume and momentum, "For the rest of my life I am tied down to an unaging 20-something relative who can't live more than a few minutes away from me because I'm his fucking food source. Long-term, my choices are total isolation from society or starting my life over every time people question why you aren't aging." She buries her face in her hands for a moment, "I'm lying to my friends already, how long before I push them away completely?" He appears to have no answer, so she bursts out, "No wonder my aunt fell in love with you. You had her isolated! You were the only person she was allowed to be close to who wasn't related to her. It wasn't love, it was fucking Stockholm syndrome!"

She looks up and spits the last sentence into his face, and he is taken aback. His eyes go wide with hurt. His expression slowly gets sadder and more closed off, his arms tightening and his shoulders going rigid. His eyes grow wide and moist, and after a pause, he speaks quietly.

"I don't understand why you have so much anger and negativity towards me."

Maeve sighs and looks away, "Of course you don't." She steps past him, grabbing her phone and purse from the island as she rushes for the door.

"Where are you going?" He asks, but she ignores him, stepping out, "This won't solve anything, you know!" He calls after her as the door slams shut. He looks around silently at the empty apartment and mutters to himself with conviction, "Insolent child."

Maeve is texting violently before she even gets out of the building. It's an SOS, personal emergency meeting request to each of her friends. Sia responds first, then Noam types back that he and Sol are on their way as well. Maeve stomps along the street towards their regular bar, arms rigid at her sides. It is a chilly night and she wishes she'd been in a state of mind to grab a jacket. Or her purse. Luckily she keeps some money in her phone wallet.

*If he wasn't such an oblivious, controlling asshole I wouldn't be out in the cold, anyway.* She thinks, then stops for a moment in the middle of the sidewalk. What is she going to tell her friends? Pretty hard to describe the fight and keep up her lie about an addicted cousin.

*Fuck it.*

She takes a particularly determined step forward and keeps walking.

*This is not going to be some shitty cliché vampire story where I hide the truth to protect people and wind up the tragic victim. I'm telling them. Everything.*

*A small college bar  
One hour later*

"It all depends on how strong of a conduit you are." Maeve sips at her rum and coke.

"Conduit?" Sol asks.

"Magic flows through everything, right?" Maeve becomes animated, talking with her hands as she attempts to explain something she has never talked about outside of the coven, "But some things, some people, are stronger conduits than others. My family is a long line of very...conductive witches," the sentence feels uncomfortable, arrogant in her mouth.

"So it is genetic?" Sol's hands grasp their pitcher tightly, elbows tucked in at their sides, practically vibrating with curiosity.

"Possibly. That would certainly explain why fewer and fewer conduits have been born in my family over the past centuries," Maeve tucks a foot underneath her, shifting in the booth, "Maybe as the gene pool gets bigger, there are less children with a strongly active conduit gene?" Maeve stumbles to a stop. She looks over her drink at three sets of silent, incredulous faces.

“Hold up, go back.” Sol leans forward over their fruity cocktail pitcher, almost flinging a gummy worm across the booth with the crazy straw. “So you can do magic? Like, honest-to-fuck, magic-with-a-C’, levitate-stuff-across-the-room, storybook magic?”

Maeve’s laugh doesn’t quite get off the ground, “Not...exactly. I can’t fly or move objects around...but my being, my body, channels a lot of metaphysical energy. I’m like a car battery compared to AA. It flows through me, a fire hose versus a kitchen faucet.”

“Which is it?” Noam shakes his head, “A battery or a fire hose?”

Sia leans forward and narrows her eyes, “Prove it.” She spits before Maeve can answer Noam’s question.

“Excuse me?” Maeve squints and shakes her head.

“Look, I believe in magic, we all do. You say you’re a witch, but we are all witches. Communicating with entities, manipulating energies...but all that stuff is just ... It’s shouting into the void, choosing to believe the echoes or ripples we see in our lives are the answer.” Sia shakes her head and her face twists between concern and anger, “Are you sure your cousin didn’t slip you anything? Because otherwise it sounds like all you are saying is you’re a better witch than us because you, what?” She raises her beer and tilts it to the side before setting it sharply back on the table, “Were raised by pagans? Because your mother was a witch?”

Before Sia can finish her sentence, Maeve takes off her new protection charm and sets it on the table. She reaches out to grab Sia’s arm. Maeve’s other hand clasps Noam’s and she locks eyes with Sol. Sia’s voice trails off. Maeve focuses on pressing energy out through her hands and eyes towards her friends. She feels love and warmth flow like pink syrup into them, sticky and comforting. Sol reaches out to hover a shaky hand over Maeve’s arm. Skepticism fades slowly from their faces as the energy flows up their veins and into their chests. After a few moments, Maeve leans away from them with a long breath and slips the charm back around her neck.

“That’s some real shit,” Noam says from beside her, opening and closing his hand slowly. “I mean, you all felt that, right? Can you teach us to do that?” He stirs his vodka soda, “Is it some sort of, ‘it is your mind you must bend’ situation?”

“Like I said,” Maeve runs a hand through her hair. “It depends on how strong of a conduit you are. It doesn’t--” Her eyes snap over to Umbrosia, “--make me a better witch. Yes, I can feel energy more easily than some, tap into or communicate with certain entities. But having access to a fire hose isn’t the same thing as knowing how to swim.”

“Girl, you are hella bad at metaphors.” Sia acquiesces a slight grin, raises an eyebrow and her beer. “So how did you find out you were a...conduit?”

“My mom says she knew when I was born, that she could feel the energy start to flow through me during the birth.” Maeve shrugs, “I didn’t find out what it meant until I was older, like ten I think? But honestly I can’t remember a time not knowing.”

“So, your cousin, does he know about this? Is he a conduit?” Sia asks as she settles her beer firmly on the table.

“Yes and no.” Maeve takes a deep drink, sets her glass back on the table, lifts it half up for another sip, then back down again. She fiddles with the straw a moment, tucking her hands in her lap, and focuses her gaze to a spot on the table. Without looking up, she finally speaks, “Dolan is not my cousin. And he isn’t an addict. At least not to drugs. He’s a vampire. My mother calls him Fuil Sidhe, blood fairy.”

Their silence drags on for a few moments, the sounds from the rest of the bar rushing in to fill it as she feels the blood rushing in her ears. Slowly she raises her eyes and looks around at each of them. Noam has one eyebrow raised insanely high as he sips his drink at her. Sol has their chin propped up on one knee, a gummy worm hanging from the corner of their mouth like a limp cigar, eyes narrowed in contemplation. Sia sits back and lets out a slow breath, resting her palms flat on the table, not meeting Maeve’s eyes.

“So, like, he’s into blood-play?” Noam tentatively breaks the silence.

“No.” Maeve shakes her head violently, then stops, “Well, yes, technically, I think, but that’s not what I’m saying.” She takes a shaky breath, fumbling for words, trying to ignore a lifetime’s worth of warnings not to reveal the coven’s secret. “More like; bad teen romance, drinks blood to survive, pretty much immortal being.”

Sol chews their gummy worm a few times, then slurps it down their throat, whole. “Are you screwing with us?”

Maeve chuckles and lets a small smile escape, “I really wish I were.” She continues her explanation, hoping it will help the reality of the situation sink in, “Dolan has been bound to my family by blood magic for hundreds of years. He was kicked out of the Faerie realm and cursed to live on earth around the time of the witch hunts. He needs magic to survive, but can’t access it on its own. He has to...consume it...from a conduit. Through our blood. Most humans aren’t very strong conduits, so it takes a lot more blood for a Fuil Sidhe to survive on them. One of my ancestors entered into a blood pact with Dolan, back then. She bound him so he can only feed from our bloodline. In return, we have to provide our blood for him. At the time, she felt she was keeping others from becoming prey. Plus he protected our family during the witch hunts.” Maeve lifts her glass to take a drink, but pauses, “At least, that’s the story my family has passed down.”

Sia finally speaks, "So, hypothetically, if this is true and my best friend is not suffering severe mental illness," she widens her eyes at the thought, closes them, and finally meets Maeve's gaze, "What happens if your family refuses to...feed...him?" Sia visibly shudders, "Or if he feeds from someone not related to you?"

Maeve shrugs and rolls her eyes, "Supposedly there are some horrible supernatural consequences. Plague on the family, otherworldly spirits attacking, everyone in the family dying in agony, including Dolan." She looks directly at Sia, "Stuff bad enough that no one in the family is willing to risk it, including Dolan. I've seen him starve for days if he can't feed off one of us, although I'm sure it must be tempting to feed off of strangers after days with no magic."

"Wait, 'us'?" Noam cuts in, placing a hand on Maeve's arm, "Maeve, is he feeding on you?"

Sol places their hand on the table near Maeve's and Umbrosia breathes in sharply, clenching both hands around her beer bottle.

"Yes." Maeve says quickly, "Only since he moved in two weeks ago. Before that he fed from my aunt Linda. The two of them were lovers." She holds up her hand before Sia's outraged concern can cut her off, "It's not anything like that with the two of us, I promise. I was telling the truth when I said he is like an uncle to me." She takes a beat to choose her words carefully, "My aunt Linda and I were the last strong conduits in our bloodline, at least that we know of. She...passed away about two weeks ago so that leaves me."

"And, you're just..fine with that?" Noam asks, covering her shoulder with his other hand.

"I... don't know. I'm not really sure what other options I have. Being a conduit, this curse...they're just part of being who I am. Just, a fact I'm stuck with." She sees them looking at her, all half believing, all concerned, all clueless about how to help or what to say. With an exhausted groan she drops her forehead to the table.

With her head down, she doesn't see the look that passes between the other three. Slowly, Noam raises his finger to his temple and swirls it and mouths, "Crazy?", his eyebrows forming a question mark. Sol nods emphatically, slurping through their crazy straw again. Umbrosia mouths back, "Bananas."

"Well." Sia says with conviction, "I officially call a time-out from this intense supernatural shit. It's Saturday night. I say we get shitfaced and process all this tomorrow along with our hangovers. Who wants another drink?"

Noam nods and Sol shakes their head, motioning to the half-full pitcher. Without lifting her head from the table, Maeve raises her empty glass with another groan.