

## **Blood That Binds Ep 7 - The Trickle of Life**

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*The Apartment*

*The Next Morning*

Maeve awakens with a moan to gentle tapping and her door swinging open. Dolan tiptoes inside, coffee cup in each hand with one arm raised to cover his eyes.

“Morning sunshines, everyone under the covers? No naked lady bits sticking out?”

He peeks under his arm to survey the room. Maeve is curled in a half-fetal position on her stomach, hair covering her face and comforter wrapped around her hiding all but one arm, one leg and half an ass cheek. The floor is littered with clothing, including jeans, bra, leather jacket and one--two pairs of underwear.

Disappointed, Dolan lowers his arm.

“Oh, she must have snuck out.”

He steps carefully around the discarded clothing to sit on the edge of Maeve’s bed.

“Naked...bits...”

Maeve groans and fumbles with one arm to tuck more of herself under the covers, including her buttock.

“Go ‘way.”

“I had the best time last night, and that extra snack really helped stave off a hangover.”

Dolan leans over and sets one cup of coffee on the nightstand next to Maeve’s sigil charms. The other he waves near her nose. Her head pops up almost instantly and she struggles to push hair out of her face. Eyes creak open in the morning light and focus on the cup of salvation. The warm brown liquid swirls with creamer in the mug, and steam rises up from the surface in tempting curls and puffs.

“Coffee?”

She sits up slowly, pulling the comforter with her to wrap around her torso and legs. The warm fabric softens the harsh sensation of being awake, and the even more annoying presence of the vampire sitting in front of her.

“Coffee.”

She holds out one hand, the other clutching the blanket to her chest.

“You know what would make me feel even better, though?”

His eyes flash with a hungry light and dip to her arm.

With a sigh, she tucks the blanket into her armpits to hold it up, pulls off her protection charm, then offers one inner elbow while the other hand again reaches for the mug.

“Coffee or your life,” She grumbles.

He surrenders the coffee with a barely contained grin as fangs slip out from under his upper lip. For the next minute or so, they sit in silence as the coffee works to clear Maeve’s foggy head and the blood chases hunger pangs from both their stomachs.

Without the charm on, her senses clear like a dust cloud lifting from her eyes, ears, nose and skin. She can taste the notes of vanilla creamer and coffee bean together yet separate from each other in symbiotic unity. Carefully, she swirls the cup so that the liquid moves clockwise, drawing in a warm and comforting red energy. When she drinks it, she can feel the energy pouring into her...just as it pours from her veins into Dolan’s hungry lips.

When he is done feeding, Maeve has finished the first cup of coffee and is reaching for the second. Dolan remains on her bed, wiping his mouth and crossing his arms in satisfaction.

“Your friends are delightful. I think Umbrosia may actually be one step closer to not hating me. Noam is...well...strange, but still entertaining. And Sol, they are just--am I using that right, ‘they’?”

He pauses, seeking Maeve’s approval and she nods, giving a slight smile.

“Absolutely fascinating coven, I think.”

“We’re not really a coven.”

Maeve’s voice is a bit less raspy now.

“Oh, you humans and your terms for things. You change every 20 years or so, who can keep up.”

Maeve is silent, her eyes glazed over and sinking into the depths of her coffee mug. She blows on it gently and takes a large gulp.

Dolan lets a puff of air out through his lips. His eyes trail down along the floor.

"That woman you brought home last night, she was very attractive."

"Nope."

Maeve's eyes soar up from the brown liquid, suddenly alert.

"We are not talking about my sex life. Not now, not ever."

Dolan rolls his eyes.

"Oh, is that what you were doing? I couldn't tell from all the noise you were making."

Maeve splutters on her coffee, her cheeks turning red.

"Come to think of it, how did I not hear her sneak out this morning?" His face scrunches in confusion.

"Ok, out of my room please." She raises an index finger and points firmly at the door.

"I know, it's embarrassing to have someone leave without a kiss good morning, but you and I can talk about it. Come on, we were bonding!" He squeezes and shakes her knee like one would a child's.

"I am naked, I have not had enough coffee to deal with you right now, and," She gives him a sharp nudge with her foot, "We are not discussing what I do naked with other people in my bedroom!"

"Should we talk about it in the kitchen, then?"

"Get OUT!"

Dolan stands, whining complaints perched on his lips, then pauses to snatch something off the floor at supernatural speed. With a huge grin and his back to her, he continues to the door. At the threshold he turns and holds up a small lacy white bundle.

"Well, at least she left you these."

He grins and tosses it to her, then turns out of the room towards the hallway.

She catches the scrap of clothing on instinct, shaking it out to reveal a white pair of panties. Along the bikini line a string of numbers stand out sharply in black ink.

*Phone numbers.*

Maeve realizes and turns bright red. Her eyes drift from the panties to her bed sheet, a smear of red glaring up at her.

“Dolan! You got my blood on the bed!”

She doesn’t bother raising her voice. Her throat is still raw and she knows he can hear her easily from the hallway.

He breathes in through his nostrils and calls back, laughter in his voice.

“Wasn’t me, sweetheart.”

Maeve tosses the comforter aside and glances down between her legs, then groans as she sees red on her thighs and the source of the stain on her bed.

“Jesus fucking shit balls.”

Dolan chuckles, already down the hall in the kitchen. Slowly, a puzzled look climbs over his face.

“How *did* she leave without me hearing her?”

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*Later that day*

*The street outside the apartment*

Umbrosia senses Maeve’s sour expression before her best friend is halfway down the bus steps to the street. Sia waits patiently at the stop while several other pedestrians pass between the two of them. She sips a protein shake, raising both her eyebrows and second smoothie in her other hand. She gives the smoothie to Maeve as soon as the witch is close enough to her.

“What put you in such a bad mood? Didn’t you and that blonde chick hook up last night?”

Umbrosia asks, no hello needed, as the two start off down the street. Hissing bus brakes give way to the roar of an engine as the giant vehicle matches their speed then passes them. Maeve sucks on the smoothie and makes a face as freezing pain climbs up through her skull. She

closes her eyes briefly only to trip on an uneven sidewalk panel. Sia's face crumples in sympathy.

"Ooh, was she bad? Sometimes crazy tattooed people can be really vanilla pillow princesses."

Her voice lowers slightly as they turn down a side street and the pedestrian traffic thins. Maeve shakes her head, pushing her hair back from her face. She takes another sip, slower this time.

"Of course I get a freaking brain freeze. No. I mean, I don't really remember that well. I think I got nervous and drank too much."

"And we all die of shock."

Umbrosia nods calmly down at her friend.

"Screw you," Maeve mutters, kicking at an empty soda can on the sidewalk.

Sia wraps her arm around the shorter woman's shoulders.

"Hey, no judgement. We all know that someday you will be brave enough to sleep with a woman while sober enough to remember it."

She pats Maeve's arm and releases her.

"In the meantime, there are plenty of attractive men and enbies out there for you."

A man coming towards them on the sidewalk hears the sentence and fixates on them, raking his eyes back and forth like sticky, possessive fingers. The two women tense slightly, Umbrosia flexing her muscular arms as Maeve glares daggers.

*Not you, asshole.*

She shoves a shield of unwelcoming energy at him so hard he lowers his eyes to the sidewalk and gives them a wider birth.

"Yeah, well apparently I'm never having sex in my own apartment again, since Dolan can hear *everything* with his stupid vampire ears."

Maeve nearly flings smoothie across the sidewalk as her rant intensifies.

"And, even though I really liked that girl, I'm probably never going to see her again, since I started my period in the middle of the night. Probably why she snuck out this morning without saying goodbye."

“Oof. Yeah, your uterus hates you.”

Umbrosia fluffs her hair, making sure it isn't escaping the headband tucked around it.

“If she can't handle another woman's period she probably shouldn't be hooking up with women.”

“Right?!”

Maeve hooks the thumb of her free hand through her backpack strap. The two fall into silence for a few moments as they sip their morning drinks. Maeve slips a hand into her jacket pocket and her fingers touch lace.

“Although...”

She cocks her head to the side and squints.

“She did leave her underwear on my floor. With her phone number written on it.”

Sia's head whips around.

“Really? That's odd. Maybe that's like her *thing*. Like a calling card. Or a serial killer's signature.”

Maeve laughs, “Yeah or like when people write their information on a card in their wallets, ‘If found, please return to...’”

“8-6-7-5-wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am.”

Sia's chuckle turns into a snort.

Maeve gives a half smile around a deep draw of her smoothie. Umbrosia tosses an arm around her shoulders and gives a small squeeze. Maeve fixates on their feet swinging in and out of her downward gaze. One pair of black, square-heeled ankle boots taking shortened strides to match her own round-toed yellow flats.

Slowly her eyes trail up to take in the hedges, trees and grass that emerge alongside the sidewalk as they approached the great behemoth that is the library. There is so much more sky to see in this part of the city, although everywhere she looks old and new architecture create a blocky silhouette of stone and steel against the blue and white clouds. Cars skim past them, a constant hum of “*Busybusybusy*” in her ears and the smell of exhaust mingles with damp grass in her throat. She reaches out a tendril of her own aura and touches the industrial energy buzzing through the city's streets like lifeblood, connecting every person, car, building and tree.

“How are things with the blood-sucker?”

Maeve exhales slowly through her nose.

“Well, we’re starting to get into more of a rhythm I think. It helps that you all invited him out last night.

“Phssshhhh.”

The arm drops from Maeve’s shoulder. Sia’s eyes roam up and down the street.

“Somebody’s gotta keep an eye out for you. The less you’re alone with him the better.”

“I do live with him.”

Maeve tugs the straps on her backpack, slurping the last of her smoothie.

“I shared a room with my foster sister for three years and hardly ever saw her.”

Sia finishes her protein shake and reaches around to tuck the bottle into a side pocket of her backpack.

“I guess she didn’t show up sitting on your bed while you were still naked to drink you for breakfast and bond over your sex life.”

She pauses to toss the empty cup in a trash can.

“Ew?” Umbrosia comes to a full stop and turns to face Maeve. “And you didn’t kick his ass out?”

“He had coffee.”

Maeve mumbles with a shrug and the two continue walking.

“Glad to know he’s being controlling and creepy as well as using you as a food source.” Sia sighs sharply. “The sooner we break that damn spell the better.”

Anxiety grips Maeve's chest like a gentle but unwelcome touch, a stone sitting in the place next to her heart where hope should be. Invasive images of slowly aging in isolation as a withering blood bag to her ageless uncle flood her mind’s eye.

“We don’t even know if it can be broken.”

Umbrosia shrugs nonchalantly, eyes flicking sharply to her favorite person.

“Well, then we’ll kill him.”

“Who are we killing?”

“Guys, we can’t just kill people. That would be really bad karma.”

Noam’s broad shoulders stride out from behind a column at the bottom of the library’s stone-bannistered steps. Sol unfolds from their seat on the bottom step. Sia comes to a stop in front of the two.

“Not people. Just creepy blood-drinking uncles.”

“Oh, no, yeah. Those we can kill.”

Sol nods along, brushing bangs out of their face. The weight of their bag causes them to lean and shift their footing at the small movement. The corners of Noam’s mouth turn down and chin flattens to echo an arch in the library entrance behind him, his nod showing firm but dispassionate support.

Maeve rolls her eyes and continues past them, hiding a smile. She trudges up the steps, shoulders beginning aching after the long walk with a backpack full of books.

“We can’t kill Dolan. Imagine the confusion the crimes division would deal with when they figure out the body isn’t human.”

Inside the library, a cool wave of old, high-minded energy washes over the group and their voices drop to lower tones. Maeve pauses to take a deep breath of the welcoming and familiar hive-spirit. Thousands of books murmur in their stacks, a collective hum that rises to the vaulted ceiling.

Sol approaches the front desk backwards on their tiptoes to settle their bag on the counter. They begin unloading the backpack, separating out items to return. Sia steps up to the other attendant and asks for a key to one of the group study rooms. Maeve comes idly to her side, listening to her own footsteps echo on the hard tile. Her ears then pick up a quiet conversation between the librarian and Sol.

“So I’ll just be returning these, but I’d like to keep this one for our study session. Do I need to renew it, or can I just give it back to you when we’re done?”

Sol holds out a short, thick volume by the spine. The librarian smiles. He’s an attractive young man with the dark eye circles of a graduate student.



“Let me just check your return date for you. I’ll need your student ID number.”

He reaches for the book and his fingers close over Sol’s hand. The touch is brief, as Sol immediately jerks away and stands frozen, lips parted, eyes glued to their hand.

Maeve’s eyes barely catch the touch. Noam strides to Sol’s side in two large steps and opens his own mouth to speak, but Sol snaps their jaw shut and drops their hand smoothly to their side, wiping it on their clothing before shoving it deep in their pocket. Their face and tone goes completely cold.

“Oh-eight-thirty-two-fifty.”

They all wait in silence as the librarian scans the book, raising an eyebrow slightly at their strange behavior. Maeve reaches out a tendril of questioning, comforting energy towards Sol but meets with a solid, cool wall, like energetic concrete. Noam takes the book from the librarian when it is offered back. Sol turns and walks towards the study rooms without another word, arms tucked tightly to their sides. Sia scoops up the abandoned backpack and the three follow Sol in defensive formation.

Once they are in the room, Sol sinks into one of the six chairs, dropping their forehead to the table. As they let out a long breath, Maeve feels the energetic walls fall away bit by bit. She reaches out tentatively with warm comfort again, and this time feels Sol’s energy wrap around it, spiritual hand holding hand.

Noam and Sia sit on either side of Sol, while Maeve takes one of the end seats. Noam crosses his arms and leans back in his chair, body relaxed but eyes shining and nostrils flaring. After a short silence, Sol’s head comes up with a small smile.

“I’m fine, guys. I’m not made of glass. It just took me by surprise.”

“You could always wear…”

Umbrosia begins. Sol shakes their head, bright bangs falling into their face

“I’m not wearing gloves. I’m not Madonna and I get enough weird looks as it is. Can we just work? I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

A trio of quiet agreement accompanies shuffling and unzipping as various study tools appear. Within a few minutes the table is covered in books, notes and printed papers. Noam’s high-powered tablet shuffles between twenty screens and tabs.

“I’ve created an Excel spreadsheet with the questions we came up with. It will automatically quantify the data from survey answers into multiple comparisons.”

He spins the tablet around to show everyone the screen. Maeve frowns at the tiny boxes, numbers, and blank charts. Umbrosia leans forward, using two fingers to flip between several sheets within the document.

“So we will be able to explore the survey answers compared to each other. The numbers and percentages of people that have similar experiences or beliefs.”

“Yes. And also how that compares to the spread of the themes we identified within major ancient spiritual practices, broken down by practice, geography and era.”

He brings up each of the charts to demonstrate.

“What about comparing the ancient data to itself? Without the survey results.”

Maeve brings her hand to her collarbone in thought. As her fingers run over bare flesh, a notion that she’s forgotten something flickers across her mind.

“Yep that will be in there as well. The big job will be actually inputting the thematic data for each spiritual practice.”

“In English, please?”

She pulls her focus back to the project at hand.

“He means that to get the big categories of ancient beliefs and compare them to modern experiences, we have to put in the data by hand for each theme, and for each religion we include.”

“How do we even quantify that? We’ll have to cite sources.”

“It will be time-consuming, but it’s possible. If we stick to just a couple of established, reliable sources for each religion it will help keep things manageable.”

“Ok, so we all have many, many hours of research and data entry ahead of us.”

“Noam and I will handle the actual data entry-”

“So you two don’t screw up my programming.”

“- if you two can do the research and actually gather the numbers. I will also be distributing the survey link to as many people on campus as I can, including the whole campus.”

“And next weekend we have a booth at the Pagan Pop-Up.”

“So we’ll get some more survey answers on our computers from the crowd then.”

“In the meantime...”

“You and I have to go hit the stacks so these two actually have something to put into this gorgeous program Noam created.”

Maeve reaches out and squeezes Noam’s forearm. He glances up from the tablet screen to smile at her before disappearing back into the numbers.

Maeve and Sia head down into the stacks. While Sia splits off on the main floor to find anthropology, Maeve heads down a level to religious texts. Every level of the library has the dust and hazy, muffled feel which comes with a century or so of paper mites. This level in particular feels reverent. Texts nearly a century old mutter to themselves, side by side with freshly printed analysis. She gently grazes her fingertips along the shelves, feeling side by side the Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Catholic and various pagan texts. Some hold a steadfast promise of absolute truth, while others feel more skeptical and questioning. All whisper to themselves, scarcely noticing her passing.

At the end of a stack, she logs on to a catalog computer station and searches through for a while, jotting down reference numbers and titles in a notebook.

Several hours later, Maeve makes what feels like her millionth trip between a small study table and the nearest “return unshelved” cart with a stack of books in her arms. She has already filled three pages in her notebook with information and citations to add to Noam’s excel data. She then makes her way down a few aisles and into a corner between two shelving units, scanning decimal numbers for a book that is probably already checked out, with her luck.

Unable to find it anywhere in the section, she rests her head against the books in defeat. They whisper to her again, and she wishes she could absorb their knowledge as easily as she can feel the energy flowing along their spines. Then an altogether different whisper slips into her ear.

“I don’t think you’ll learn much that way.”

Dolan’s voice is so unexpected she feels her heart jump nearly out of her chest. Within a millisecond, though, she realizes it is him and bites down hard on the shriek before it can escape her throat, letting it out instead through her nostrils in a loud, irritated sigh. Fists unclenching at her sides, she turns her head slowly to glare daggers at him.

He is backlit by the recessed ceiling lights, leaving a shadow over his face which emphasizes the glow coming from within his two hungry irises.

“You seriously live to be a giant cliché of yourself, don’t you? Stalking me in the library stacks? Luring me into a dark corner?” \*\*\*throat noise of disgust\*\*\*

Her voice is low, but drips with annoyance.

Dolan raises both eyebrows and presses thin fingertips to his chest in deep offense. He leans his back against the shelving unit, allowing light to fall on his face and dim the intensity of his eyes.

“I did not *lure* you anywhere. I simply hunted you down...”

It is Maeve’s turn to raise her eyebrows. Dolan quickly catches himself, shoving his hands in his pockets and trailing his eyes down to the floor. He rolls his shoulders forward and sinks in on himself a little.

“Erm, came and found you...”

His eyes flick up to hers again, sharp and confrontational.

“To ask if you plan on ever feeding me lunch.”

Maeve glances at her smartwatch. It’s nearly 3 pm.

*Shit.*

She crosses her arms over her chest.

“You can’t just stalk me wherever I go and creep up on me like we’re in some sort of horror film. If you need to feed, text me or some shit like a normal person.”

Faster than her eye can follow, Dolan has one hand gripping each of her forearms tightly, books and shelves pressing against her back. His eyes leer down into hers, but she cannot look away from the snarl and fully descended fangs just inches from her face. His voice is quiet, but hard as gravel as he speaks, and in her head his energy is hot and loud as a scream.

“I told you not to forget that I’m not human. If you don’t want to see my predatory side, don’t make me track you down like an animal every time I need to feed.”

He grasps her chin, forcing her eyes up to his.

“You have never known hunger, child, so let me tell you that living under the threat of starvation at the whim of a stubborn witch brat is not pleasant. Continue making it unpleasant for me, and I promise...”

He jerks her chin to the side, exposing her neck, his lips an inch from her ear.

“I will make it unbearable for you.”

His teeth rip into her flesh, tearing open two bloody holes in her skin. Without warning, without his usual anesthetic saliva to dull the pain, Maeve becomes his prey. Like a mouse caught in a cat’s maw she freezes; eyes unfocused, pulse pounding and mind blank. He gorges himself, pulling the blood and magic from her in great, deep draughts. In only moments, before her mind or body can react, he is finished with her. Licking her wound closed, he drops her body and disappears at superhuman speed.

Maeve is left to slump to the floor, feeling every bit of magic drained from her system, as though she had been a full and babbling brook that, hit by sudden drought, is now left with nothing but a trickle of life flowing through her.