

The Bite That Binds

by Ivy Marlowe

She ran from the pack. Her mate ran faster.

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Sera Voss had spent three years working as the only human veterinarian in Ashfield, a small mountain town where roughly forty percent of the residents were people she was not technically supposed to know were shifters. They were subtle about it. She was more subtle about knowing.

The arrangement worked. She treated dogs and horses and goats and did not ask why Mr. Calloway's labrador healed from a compound fracture in eight days. She ordered the specific supplement blends that worked for species her licensing board would find confusing. She minded her business.

Then Cain Aldric walked into her practice at eleven PM with a laceration down his left arm that was already knitting itself shut, bleeding onto her waiting room floor, and completely upended it.

She smelled him before she saw him. Which was wrong, because she didn't have that capacity, except apparently on some nights she did — cedar and iron and something dark underneath that made her lungs do something involuntary.

He pushed through the door and saw her and stopped.

She'd heard about this. In the way you hear about weather patterns or geological events — theoretically, with the understanding that it happened to other people. The mate recognition. Both-directions, instant, irreversible. The stories made it sound mystical. What it actually felt like was a very loud fact.

"You're the vet," he said.

"You're bleeding on my floor," she said.

He looked down at the blood. Back at her. His eyes were gold, which was not a contact lens choice, and she was looking at him the way she looked at X-rays, trying to diagnose everything at once.

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"I'll clean it up," he said.

"I'll clean it up," she said. "Come through."

He sat on her examination table like he disapproved of the indignity of it. Big — wider through the shoulders than her table was designed for, tall enough that his boots dragged on the floor. The laceration was on the inside of his left forearm, deep enough that it would have needed stitches on a human, already sealing on him.

"What did this?" she said.

"Barbed wire."

"In the dark."

"I was moving quickly."

She cleaned it anyway. He watched her hands the whole time, which she was aware of in the way of a persistent low-level sound.

"You know what I am," he said. Not a question.

"I know what most of Ashfield is," she said. "I know how to not know things."

"Then you know what this is."

She set down the gauze. "I have a theoretical understanding of fated mate recognition, yes."

"And?"

She looked at him directly. "And I'd like to finish cleaning your arm before we have that conversation."

Something moved in his face — a surprised appreciation, like she'd passed a test neither of them had announced. She went back to the arm.

"How long have you been in Ashfield?" he said.

"Three years."

"I've been away." A pause. "Eight months. Pack business."

"Is that why we haven't—"

"Yes." Another pause, the kind with weight in it. "If I'd been here when you arrived, this would have happened three years ago."

She finished with the arm. Set down her kit. Stood in front of him and looked at him properly — the gold eyes, the jaw, the way he was sitting on her table like he was trying very hard not to be something that a small room couldn't contain.

"Cain," she said. His name from his jacket pocket paperwork, which he'd given her without being asked.

"Yes."

"I'm not afraid of you."

"I know."

"But I have questions."

"Ask them."

She asked them. He answered all of them, directly, in the flat practical way of someone who had decided on honesty as a policy. The bond — what it was, what it wasn't, what it required, what it didn't require. He was clear that it required nothing she didn't choose. He was equally clear about what he wanted, stated without performance.

She looked at him when he'd finished. Twelve minutes since he'd walked through the door. She had known him for twelve minutes and she was standing in her own examination room at eleven at night and the molecule-deep certainty of him was the most unsettling and the most irrefutable thing

she'd experienced.

"You're staying in Ashfield," she said.

"I'm home," he said.

"Then we have time," she said. "We don't have to—"

"No," he said. "We don't."

But he was looking at her. And she was looking at him. And the room smelled of cedar and iron and antiseptic, and her clinical detachment — her professional armour, her three years of careful not-knowing — had dissolved in approximately twelve minutes.

"If I asked you to come back tomorrow," she said.

"I'd come back tonight," he said. "And tomorrow."

She reached over and turned off the examination lamp.

She had thought that want like this — pre-verbal, cellular — would obliterate everything else, leave you a creature of pure sensation. It didn't. It made everything sharper. She was entirely herself and entirely his and both were completely true at the same time, which was something the theoretical understanding hadn't covered.

He was careful with her. That was the thing she hadn't expected — this large, gold-eyed person with the barbed wire laceration being careful, asking before every progression, watching her face with that absolute attention. She told him to stop being careful and he laughed — a real laugh, surprised — and stopped being careful, which was considerably more interesting.

The examination table was not where it ended up. Her back office, the low couch she used for paperwork marathons, was where it ended up, and she had both hands in his hair and his mouth at her throat and she said his name in a voice she'd never heard herself use before, low and unguarded and certain.

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When his teeth grazed the place at the juncture of her neck and shoulder she went very still.

"I won't," he said, immediately, pulling back. Clear-eyed. Present. "Not tonight. Not without—"

"I know," she said. "I know what it means."

A pause. His forehead against hers. His breathing uneven.

"Tell me when," he said. "If. Tell me when you're sure."

"I'm already sure," she said. "I'm just not in a hurry."

He exhaled. Kissed her jaw. Her cheek. The corner of her mouth.

"Eight months," he said. "I was gone eight months."

"You're here now."

"I'm here now," he said. Like a vow he was trying on. Like it fit.

She came to the decision six weeks later, in the ordinary way of things: a Tuesday morning, a cup of coffee, his jacket on the back of her kitchen chair where it had started to simply live, the realisation that certain things had already been decided by a process that predated conscious thought.

She went to the practice early. He was there — he often was by then, helping with the large-animal visits that benefited from his particular combination of calm and strength. She found him in the yard with a skittish mare, talking quietly, one hand on her flank.

He looked up when she came out. The gold eyes. The mare settled completely.

"Today," Sera said.

He understood immediately. His expression did something complex and then resolved to something simple.

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"Yes," he said.

She walked back inside. He followed.

The bite, when it came, was not what the stories made it sound like — not pain, not a symbolic wound. It was the snap of something long in tension finally released, a sound she heard with her whole nervous system, and she understood in the moment after why people used the word *complete* for it. Not because she hadn't been whole before. Because this was its own specific wholeness, the kind that requires two.

She bit him back. Not biologically necessary. Personally necessary.

He made a sound she was going to keep for the rest of her life.

Outside, Ashfield went about its business. Inside, the practice smelled of cedar and antiseptic. The skittish mare stood quiet in the yard.

On Sera Voss's intake form for that first visit, under *Nature of Injury*, she had written: *barbed wire laceration, L forearm, healing normally.*

Underneath, in smaller writing, added that Tuesday morning because she apparently felt like being precise:

Prognosis: excellent.
