

Sian's Solution

Family Blood Ties

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Published: 2011
in »Entangled«



Act natural. Act natural. The mantra repeated inside Sian Tallant's mind. It might have rattled on endlessly for all the attention she paid to it. How could you act natural if you focused on being natural?

Besides there was nothing natural about what she was doing today.

The security gates to the blood processing warehouse loomed ahead. She had a two-week contract living and working down here with two more horrible days left to get through. Not that she'd be here to finish it off if things went according to plan.

At over 300 feet below the surface, the temperature was warmer than she'd expected. Ideal for the blood donors, though. She stifled a sob. Poor Taz.

Three hours and ten minutes

The stone-faced guard watched her approach. She swallowed. Hard. Her fingers clenched on the small purse jammed into her lab coat pocket. She'd never been checked... yet. Straightening her spine, she gave the oversized, black suited vampire a brief smile. Cold and assessing, his narrowed gaze stared at her as she passed. Her back crawled until she turned the corner out of range of those frigid eyes. She shuddered. These past weeks, her nerves had gone from a controlled calm to a *she-was-being-watched-every-moment-of-the-day* edginess. If anyone found out what this group was doing, well... it would be bad... for everyone.

Coming here had been risky. Yet, she'd had no choice. Taz had to be saved.

Sian strode down the pristine white hallway. White tiles on the floor. White tiles on the ceiling. White paint on the cement walls. She winced. The color failed to put an innocent spin on the dark activity going on inside.

Crossing to the second hallway, she checked her watch. On time, as usual. Good. Everything had to appear normal. Everything. Descending to the last heavy metal door, where the carved stone walls started, Sian steeled herself for what was to come. With a deep breath, she tugged it open and stepped through. The smell assailed her first. Warm, metallic with a faint antiseptic overtone. She hated it. Despised her fellow vampires for creating this nightmare but had no way to change it. Not today. Not alone. The operation was too damn big.

Three hours and four minutes

The offices lined the far side of the cavernous room. In the second one, at the far left, her desk waited for her, groaning under the waiting stack of lab reports. The other desks were empty. Shit. Rounds had started without her. Picking up a pad of paper, she grabbed her pen, then hurried out to catch up to her coworkers. Walking through the rows of hanging bodies to where the group had started discussions, she avoided looking at the many faces staring down at her. So much pain. So much loss. Human loss. Vampire gain.

It was almost over. Thank God.

As she caught up to the others, the team leader, Dr. Magnus, was saying, "We need to increase the dose for #376. His vitals are holding, but his last series of tests came out deficient again. It's the second time we've tried to correct this. We'll give it one more attempt. If that doesn't work, we'll move him to the medical center and make a final decision then."

A shudder whispered down Sian's back. Since when had 'make a final decision' become a euphemism for pulling the plug permanently and killing a man? Keeping her gaze on her clipboard, Sian refused to let her eyes reach #376's face. She'd made that mistake on her first day. She'd been naive enough to think that studying, memorizing the human suffering would help her get these people out.

Instead, those faces, twisted under their plastic casing, permanently haunted her psyche. Realizing the enormity of the problem had grounded her in reality.

She'd come for one person. Not thousands. She couldn't help all of them. Not right now. Later. Oh, yes. Later.

Three hours

The team moved ahead of her, discussing various cases. Sian followed. Tubes moved in and through each of the sealed units, carrying nutrients in and wastes out. Small computerized units determined the correct amounts each person needed and kept detailed records of the outgoing waste.

Her scientific mind could appreciate the simplicity of the system. That the group who'd been cruel enough and evil enough to put the system in place, and to pull the necessary supply together were her own people, astounded and horrified her. Acceptance would never happen.

Vampire and human relations had come a long way. Societies lived apart. Treaties governed all economic and social behavior between the two. Mixed relationships were a sticking point, frowned on by both sides. Obviously not everyone was on board. This... manufacturing system only went to show how much her people had learned from those they secretly considered cattle.

Bastards.

Sian finished rounds with her teammates laughing and making Halloween jokes around her. She hadn't forgotten what day it was. And didn't need the reminder that it wouldn't be the intimate celebration she'd originally planned. She kept a smile on her face, even managing to come up with a small laugh of her own, while her heart ached. Checking the time, she excused herself and headed back to her piled high desk. The lab reports needed to be checked, cases needed to be flagged and notes needed to be added. In other words, everything had to stay normal. For a little while longer. Her gaze landed on the photo on her desk. Taz, his back turned to the camera, held her in a close embrace. Had it really been taken at his birthday party barely over a month ago?

Two hours twenty-five minutes

Soon. Bending her head, she tried to refocus on the stack of reports. And failed miserably. Anytime now, the first stage would begin. She rubbed her sweaty hands on her lab coat. Her nails itched to lengthen, the tips vibrating as instinct told her to stay alert, wary. She'd done them in a deep golden color before coming here. For Taz. It was his favorite color to match his favorite saying, "Pure gold, just like you."

"Sian. Can I get your help back here, please?"

Shit. Her shoulders hunched. Anytime had become *now*. She was *not* ready for this.

Spinning around, Sian saw Dr. Harvard waiting at the back door. Nervous, yet knowing he couldn't have any idea of her plans, she closed the file in front of her. The acids in her stomach awakened. "On my way." Brushing her hair back, she

pulled the mother-of-pearl hair clip out of her pocket and swept her hair up out of the way. The delay didn't help settle her nerves at all.

Please let this work.

Her stomach acids sizzled as she approached the door. With several steps to go, her nostrils flared. Death. Disease. Body fluids. Walking into the room, she could hardly see what the problem was for the staff crowding around a single bed.

Please let it not be. Not yet. It was too early. Her heart swelling against pain to come, Sian worked her way to the front of the crowd. Taz lay on the bed, his plastic casing open, his stunningly muscled body nude for everyone to gawk at. She reached out to see if he was alive when her arm was grabbed from behind.

"Don't touch. We don't know what's wrong with him." Dr. Lawrence dropped her arm to stare down at the barely alive man. "He's new. Just over four weeks. His vitals are off. Blood count is low, dangerously low, and he's not breathing properly. Whole system failure in progress."

Sian gulped, closing her eyes briefly. Surely Taz was big enough for the dose of medication she'd given him. That had always been her comfort. Big, uber healthy Taz. Indomitable Taz, brought low by a predator he hadn't seen coming.

Please let the dose be right. Her heart seized. She loved this man with everything she had. To think she might have inadvertently killed him through the act of trying to save him was too much.

"Hey, are you alright. You look a little pale."

Her eyelids popped open. Pale? She was a fucking vampire. Dead people wore her color every day of the year. She bit back her scathing comment. Normal. Everything had to remain normal. Mustering what little control she could, she said to the woman who'd spoken at her side, "I'm fine. Just a little tired."

"Have you feasted this morning? I know you've been working hard helping us out. As much as I need you here, I can't have you end up as a patient causing us more work. Go. Get a snack." Dr. Harvard nudged her shoulder.

Stumbling backward slightly, Sian breathed a sigh of relief. She couldn't help Taz at this point. Nor could she stand there silent while they worked on him.

Two hours and five minutes

Heading back to her desk, she opened one of her sister's platelet bars. Sian always kept a dozen or so on hand. She'd brought three times that many here. The thought of where the blood offered freely in the downstairs lunchroom came from turned her stomach. Those poor people.

Washing her hands afterward, she sneaked back inside the medical center. Two steps inside, she halted. Her snack threatened to revolt. Taz had been moved to a gurney. Dr. Lawrence pulled the sheet up over Taz's head and dropped it.

Sian's heart stopped. She stared down at the still form.

"Sian. Good, you're back. You missed all the action. Unfortunately, it's pushed us for time. Take this trolley downstairs to the cooler. The orderlies will deal with it later."

Ripping her gaze from the still form, she managed a professional smile and a nod. Inside she screamed. *It?* He'd said *it*. Like Taz was a slab of meat. Not

trusting herself to speak, she held the metal end bar and pushed the gurney toward the elevator. Was it her imagination or did an uncomfortable silence fill the space she'd left behind? A test? See if she had the stomach for this after her earlier exit?

Rotating her shoulders, she let them slump once the elevator doors closed and locked behind her. Thankfully the camera hung above and behind her, letting her close her eyes for a second. She didn't dare touch the motionless shape in front of her.

Not yet.

Just another hour and forty two minutes

The doors opened to a blast of cold air hitting her in the face. She crossed into the huge, stark white room full of metal drawers on the left side, a complete autopsy table setup on the right back and desks in close on the right. Taz would call it the morgue and he should know. A doctor, a savior of human souls and a raving advocate for change and equality—now a captive on a blood farm. Ironic. And her fault. Guilt twisted her insides. He should never have followed her. She'd broken it off, pushed him away. She hadn't wanted him to find out her secret. He'd be better off without her. Relationships like theirs were frowned on in both societies. He was important in his. Everything he'd built would be destroyed if people knew about her.

Taz hadn't listened, hadn't believed her lies, knowing her better than she did. How naive to think a strong man like Taz would leave it at that. That he'd let her have her say and leave him like a discarded puppy. Not Taz. He'd followed her deep into vampire territory, tracked her down. Her, a vampire tracked by a human.

And he'd been taken.

She'd seen it happen, only hadn't understood exactly what she'd seen—until later. When she'd tracked down the truth.

Staring down at the white sheeted body before her, she blinked back tears collecting in her eyes. Thankfully the morgue was empty. Swiping at her eyes and cheeks, she pulled the trolley over to the line of steel drawers. Walking to the front, she pulled the sheet back from Taz's head.

She shuddered and couldn't stop the tears from falling. She stroked his chilled forehead. Lifeless and white, Taz's icy skin was a reminder that his eternal rest wasn't the same as hers. Holding the sheet over his head, she paused, taking one last look. Impulsively, she pressed a soft kiss against his icy lips then dropped the sheet and walked away.

One hour twenty minutes

Straightening, she turned her back on her one true love and hurried into the elevator. Back up in the medical center, it appeared to be business as usual.

Hoping to remain undetected, Sian grabbed the stack of files waiting for her and carried them to her desk.

"Did you get that body downstairs okay? They were having trouble with the elevator yesterday."

Wrinkling her nose, Sian looked up to see Terrance, an orderly with a bad case of the hots for her. Like she wanted anything to do with the ghoul. Being nice for these last weeks had been hard enough. "Thanks for asking. I didn't have any trouble."

"Too bad. I could have come and rescued you." His leer widened, making her skin crawl.

"And instead, I managed without you." Turning her back on him, she reached for the next lab report.

One hour and ten minutes

Thankfully everyone left her alone for the next while and she could unbury herself from the pile of work. These people needed to be kept healthy so their blood remained sweet for selling to the vampire population. Nice. Not.

Time moved in slow motion. Refusing to hang on the minute hand of her watch, Sian went to work on the next half of her job. She strode back out to the hanging human population. God, she hated these duties. She rationalized her role as one working to keep the humans safe, to keep them healthy, until she could affect a rescue.

Checking her sheet, she walked to the last person charted and started scanning the stats on the next person. She called them people. No one else did. Everyone hanging had been assigned a number. Nasty cold attitude to what they considered animals. A food supply. That was all. Keep them healthy and keep them producing. Using her scanner, she moved from one to the next and then the next.

The computer system had been upgraded recently. It would eventually download these stats instantly for each person to the main servers. Except the new software roll out had glitched their system. The techies had set the system to send an alert with any fluctuations in the blood and fluid levels for each case, but the servers had gone down and when they'd come back up again, the techs found one complete row of humans had gone off line. It hadn't taken long for that to set off an alarming chain of events.

As a result, they'd needed her expertise and had brought her onboard. She'd been testing and analyzing the results of each person here as they reconnected and confirmed each person in the new system. So far, except for minor issues, only four had needed extra care. Her job was almost done.

Finally.

Fifty minutes

Blind to anything but the building tornado in her stomach and her work, Sian continued down her rows, scanning and cataloguing the readings. She wanted to do what she could for these poor people in the short time she had left.

"Any change on this one?"

Startled, she turned around to find her supervisor, Dr. Lawrence, glaring up at the man stretched spread eagle before her. Without thinking she followed his gaze then averted her eyes instantly. Nude and distorted with the plastic covering, he stared down at her, his blue eyes open. Swallowing, she checked the chart in her hands. "No change from yesterday."

"Good. I want to make sure he's healthy for a long time." Cryptic. Dark. So typical of the people here, as if they truly hated humans. Typical of her kind. That might have ended up being her attitude, too, if it hadn't been for Taz. He'd crept into her heart and wouldn't leave. And look where that had gotten Taz. In a morgue.

"Have you noticed anything unusual today?"

Surprised, she glanced up at him. "No, nothing. I've just started, though."

"How many are there left to do?" Those dark eyes turned on her, vestiges of his anger at the man hanging at their side still boiling in their depths.

Her palms itched with sudden sweat. She struggled to keep her voice calm. "Tonight, just a couple more. Over all, maybe twenty-five left to check and bring online?"

He nodded. "Then you only need a day, possibly two to complete this job." He paused. "Correct?"

"I should think so." She shrugged. "That's what you projected originally, and it appears to be on target."

He pursed his lips. "Good. I'll make the arrangements for your departure then." He stalked away, leaving her staring at his retreating back. Had she only imagined the menace in his voice? Her stomach didn't think so. The anxiety she'd been holding back all evening was threatening to send her system into overdrive. She wouldn't be here in two days. Instinct said he didn't intend for her to be alive in three.

Was that what happened to anyone who completed their job here? Kill them and leave no witnesses? Or had her imagination gone off the wall along with her nerves? Finding information on previous staff and indeed on anyone who worked here had been brutal. Luck had smiled on her that she'd found out about the institute at all. Labeled a research center, secrecy abounded and with good reason. The penalty for being caught blood farming was fierce. For repeat offenders—death. Her break had come when their systems had gone down. A data analyst and blood serum specialist, she'd jumped at the chance. On day 4, she'd found Taz, hanging lifeless like all the rest.

Thirty minutes

Swallowing hard, she moved swiftly down the row. She couldn't keep Taz from her mind or her heart. Over six foot, dark wavy hair and that smile. Well, she dared anyone, any female, to ignore it. In her case, that smile had slid into her

heart and made itself right at home. She caught back a sob at the thought of him lying downstairs in that cold room. Alone.

And her window of opportunity was about to close.
She'd cut it close. Too close.

Fifteen minutes

A shudder worked up her spine. Her stomach had given up a long time ago. Rotating her head, she tried to ease the knots twisting up her neck. A faint hissing sound wafted toward her. Casting a cautious glance around, she saw three orderlies, their heads bent together in deep whispers. One glanced at her, then nodded to the others. The sound heightened.

Shit.

Moving with purpose, she put distance between her and the others. Dread washed through her bloodstream. They couldn't know. They had to be discussing someone else. Coming to the end of the row, Dr. Lawrence stepped in front of her.

Her hand went to her chest. "Oh. You startled me."

"Were you going somewhere?"

There was that menacing tone again. She raised an eyebrow. "No. It's my break in a few minutes, but other than that, no." Wide-eyed, she stared up at him. "Is there a problem? Do you need my help?"

He reached out a hand for her clipboard. Checking over her notations, he studied the numbers. "We're making good progress. It seems we might not need you after today. One of my staff will be free to finish this off tomorrow."

"Oh good." She smiled amiably. "Perfect timing. Everything will be back to full operation then."

Pursing his lips, he handed back her clipboard. "So you have this row to finish. Then... what... your break? I hope you've enjoyed your time with us. I'm sure breaks must be boring for you though. What do you normally do in that time?"

Accepting her clipboard, she stared down at the sheets of numbers then up at the unfinished row. The three orderlies appeared behind the good doctor. Her stomach acids bubbled. "I usually just go for a walk or sit down with a cup of tea in one of the staff areas for my break. Get off my feet and relax." Her instincts screamed at her. With effort, she managed a normal tone of voice and even a smile for him. "I'll just finish this off if you don't mind, then go sit down for a bit."

He nodded and withdrew so quietly she almost wondered if he'd ever been there. With that short reprieve, she realized the threat had gone from bad to dangerous. She had to get out—now.

Her throat seized as the three men sauntered toward her. Regardless of what else happened tonight, she was grateful that this job was over. Keeping an eye on the approaching goons, she quickly scanned the last two people on her row. Then, as if unaware of the approaching men, she left the aisle and returned to her office.

Five minutes

Panic stirred inside as she arrived at her station.

Her desk had been cleaned off.

Doreen, her friendly and always smiling co-worker, looked up from the desk behind hers. Sian had wondered from her first day at work if Doreen was faking that much happiness, but by now, Sian realized she was just ditzy. Probably figured what was going on around her was normal.

"Oh, I thought you'd left," said Doreen, a big happy grin on her face. "I'm so glad you haven't."

"Left? I'm just about to go on my break. I still have another four hours to go on my shift." Sian's stomach was now a hard knot, her muscles leaning out, preparing for a battle she hadn't planned on. Or prepared for.

A frown split Susan's face. "Really? That can't be right. Two orderlies just came and cleaned out your desk. I asked them why and they said you'd left and wouldn't be coming back."

Chills raced down her legs and the hard ball in her stomach turned to lead. She fought to control her breathing, even her fangs started to slide out. "They probably just mixed me up with someone else."

Susan's face cleared and the sun shone in again. "Oh that makes sense. That's great. I like working with you."

Outwardly, Sian smiled. Inwardly, her mind raced over her options.

Sian put on the sweater she'd draped over the spare chair in the room, checking that her small purse and its valuable contents were still in the pocket. Everything in her quarters would have to be left behind. "I'm going on my break now. See you later." She gave a quick wave good bye, then slipped out the back door as if heading to the staff room.

The goons were nowhere in sight. Still, someone had already initiated her disappearance—from her desk at least. She daren't give them a chance to follow through. Her breath came out in uneven gusts as she passed the lunch room to the door at the far end. Making sure she wasn't being watched, she slipped inside to race down the stairs. So far so good. There were several more hallways to navigate before she finally stood in front of the steel doors of the morgue. She hadn't met anyone on the way, but that didn't mean the room was empty. Someone could have taken the elevator down.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath.

One minute.

It was time.

For better or worse.

Was he dead or alive?

She pushed open the double doors and entered.

And saw the camera above the first row of cabinets.

Shit.

That's why they'd become suspicious of her. They'd seen her kiss Taz good bye. Thankfully, the camera wasn't facing her. Unless there was more than one.

Just in case, acting as if she had an errand to run, she walked to the desk and picked up a chart and flicked through it. Then she walked over to a miscellaneous drawer and made as if to open it and slipped under the camera itself. Utilizing the vampire strength she'd been born with, she pulled on the camera support redirecting its view to the cabinets beside the door and not the door itself. Careful to keep out sight, she searched for any other cameras. And found a second one above the autopsy tables. She left that one alone. Making sure there were no more, she took a deep breath and allowed herself, for the first time, to gaze on the sheet covered form still parked in front of the steel drawers.

Nothing had changed.

He hadn't moved. Not even a twitch.

She bowed her head. She'd killed him. Tears welled up in the corner of her eyes. He should have woken up by now. He should have moved.

There was one option left. Her backup plan. A desperate attempt in desperate times. Sniffling back the pain and fear, she reached into her pocket.

Pulling the adrenaline out of her small purse, she walked over to the body and pulled back the sheet. Taz. Oh, Christ. Biting her bottom lip, she released the shuddering breath. With tears flowing in a steady drip, she placed her left hand on the rib bones just off to the left of the center of his chest—and plunged the needle directly into Taz's heart.

She emptied the syringe.

Holding her breath, she waited. And waited.

Nothing.

Please.

Sobbing openly now, Sian yanked the syringe back out, threw it across the floor and slammed both fists down hard on Taz's chest. Then slammed again even harder. Crying noisily, she screamed, "Damn it, Taz, wake up!" She leaned over his pale features. "I'm so sorry, honey. I don't want you to die. Please... don't... die."

She cried her heart out, not caring that she needed to run. That her own capture could be minutes away. She couldn't leave him. She'd killed him. Her love. Her heart—the better part of her soul.

Collapsing on top of him, she cried her out her torment.

Suddenly, through her pain and heartache, something registered.

Movement? A tremor?

The smooth heavily muscled chest under her cheek heaved. Air exhaled from Taz's mouth.

She stilled. Holding her breath, she studied his face and waited.

Breathe, damn you. Breathe.

His chest moved again. She gasped and waited for the magical third movement.

There.

"Taz!"

Taz heaved a harsh gasping breath. Color rushed through his face as blood pumped from his once-again beating heart. He groaned, softly at first, then louder as chilled ribs swelled, reaching for warmth and life.

He was alive.

Oh, thank you. Eyes shining through the tears, Sian rubbed her hands over his chest and arms, helping the blood to circulate through his chilled system. Pulling

the sheet all the way off, she began massaging his heavy thighs and calves. He'd been in that deep coma state for too long. Getting him moving and at the speed they needed him to move could be a challenge.

"Sian?" his voice, rusty and hoarse, brought more tears to her eyes.

"Yes, yes, it's me." Smiling, laughing, crying, she swooped down to place a gentle kiss on his lips. "I'm so sorry, but we have to get out of here. Now. You're in danger. We both are." Slipping her arms under his shoulders, she struggled to get him into a sitting position. "Try to stand up."

Muscles bunched as he switched to a sitting position with only minor difficulty.

"Hey, how does that feel?" She peered into his huge chocolate eyes that blinked back at her owlishly.

"What happened?"

She opened her mouth when he butted in, "And the truth. All of it." Reaching up, he clapped his hands to the side of his head. "This has got to be the worst hangover ever."

She snorted. "Not even close. I need you to listen. We don't have much time."

Holding his gaze, she highlighted the events of the last few weeks as she knew them since their parting. Leaving out a few of their more personal issues.

"I've been here in suspension for weeks? Here? Seriously?" He glanced down as if just understanding he was nude. His gaze widened as he looked around the room. "Jesus. Are we in a morgue? Holy shit." He hopped off the table, and his knees buckled, sending him almost to the floor.

Sian wrapped her arms around his chest, helping him to stand. "I died? Like really dead? Like a side of beef dead?" His muscles trembled with the effort.

"Not quite. Drug induced to make it appear that way." She winced at the brown fury in his gaze. "You gave me the idea a while ago. Something you'd had to do with one of your patients. So when I needed a way to get you off the production line, that's the solution I came up with." Sian glanced at the camera and swallowed. They needed to get out of here. Fast.

He blinked at her once, then again. "I gave you the idea? You could have killed me. You know that?"

"And I could have left you to live the rest of your natural life pumping out blood for others to drink," she snapped, then immediately felt like shit. "I'm sorry. It's all I could think to do."

He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. "No. *I'm* sorry. You saved my life. I do appreciate it."

When he opened his eyes, a warm golden glow shone deep inside. "So you don't want anything more to do with me, huh? Don't love me anymore, I believe you said."

"I had to say that," she hissed.

"Had to?" The note of incredulity made her wince. "You have a shit ton of explaining to do, Sian."

"I know. And I will. Later. We have to get the hell out of here before we're both caught and terminated." She started to walk away when her arm was caught, pulled back and she found herself wrapped in an intimate embrace, her face only inches from his.

His eyes glowed with love—for her. She closed her eyes, her heart so full she didn't think she could stand it. "I'm so sorry. I thought it would be better if we weren't together. If you stopped caring for me and went ahead with your life that... that you'd be happier." She stumbled over her explanation, unable to look him in the eye. There was so much more to tell. Only not here. Definitely not here. "There's so much more to explain."

"Happier? Better off? More to explain?" Long smooth hands reached up to hold her head fast. "Look at me."

She raised her gaze slowly until it was caught and held by his.

"I love you. That's it. Period. There is no *better if we're not together*. There is no *happier without you*. More explanations won't matter. I couldn't believe it when you broke it off. You were my heart, my soul. You are still my heart and soul. I wouldn't believe you. I couldn't," he said simply. "I had to find you and persuade you to change your mind." He lowered his head until his forehead rested on hers. "I can't live without you."

She sniffled, tears collected at the corner of her eyes. "And I don't want to live without you."

He smiled, that long slow smile that sent her heart racing. Cradling her head, he placed his lips tenderly against hers. And just held them there for a long gentle moment. Sealing them together, two halves of a whole. A teardrop fell. Then another. His tenderness, her undoing.

"Don't cry," he whispered in that thick warm voice she loved. She'd been afraid for so long, been scared that he wouldn't survive for so long that she couldn't quite believe that he was here. His arms held her as she'd wished, dreamt of, for so long.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I know. And I love you. We belong together. Got it?" His rich chocolate gaze searched the depths of hers.

"Got it." She could only hope it felt that way when he learned the truth about her.

"Then let's get the hell out of here. You how much I love having you as my blanket, but I need something a little larger or I'm going to freeze my ass off very quickly."

"I know it's Halloween, but I don't think *Nude God* is the costume you were planning for this year. Although that undead look you had going on a little while ago would have been a hit."

A garbled choke escaped his throat.

Sadness crept over her at the stunned look on his face. She nodded. "Puts the length of your captivity in perspective, doesn't it?" Knowing he needed a little time to digest, she added, "Let me see if I can find you something to wear." Leaving the warmth of his arms, she hunted through the desk drawers and checked behind the doors. A lab coat hung on the inside of the bathroom door. Tossing it to him, she went on the hunt for pants. Casting a doubtful glance at the steel drawers, she strode across and systematically checked every one. The first four were empty. The next held an older female. She shuddered and slammed it closed. The one after that, a young male. At the last drawer, she got lucky. Obviously used for storage, it contained several changes of clothing, empty bags, and shoes. She didn't want to consider why anyone would need such things in this room.

Grabbing up an armload, she dumped the mess beside Taz. "Get dressed. We need to move."

Luckily, a pair of scrubs fit as did a pair of shoes. No socks. Giving him a once over, Sian nodded. "Let's go."

Opening the door, she peered around the corner. "All clear. Move."

Slipping into the hallway, she led the way to the second door down, the supply room if her memory was correct. The back wall of this room lifted up like a massive garage door giving easy access to the loading area where the train, the only way in or out of here, stopped. This was the end of the line. The tracks stopped here. Not even a turnaround existed, which had to mean the train could drive in both directions.

She'd downloaded and memorized the blueprints on her second day here, along with the train schedule. It brought in staff, equipment and supplies, and removed waste, including bodies. To where, she didn't know. She'd tried but hadn't been able to find out.

She frowned. Not that it counted as a train, more like a mining cart system with an engine on the front. The passengers didn't ride in it, they rode on it. The trip in had taken less than an hour, maybe even half that. Hence her timing for this escape. The train should be arriving any time. And they needed to be on it.

Or they walked out.

The back garage door was open. "Shit," she whispered, "we might be too late." Together, they raced to the loading docks. Taz, gaining strength with every step, stayed one step ahead of her, shielding her. She had to laugh. Still recuperating human versus a female vampire in her prime. No contest. Except he still didn't know about her heritage. Warmth curled inside at having him back, strong and in command again.

Sneaking a peak around his shoulder, she saw two men unloading the train.

"We need to make that train. There's not another one until tomorrow. Or we walk the tracks out, which could take hours."

He nodded. His muscles bunched.

She worried on it. He wasn't up to full strength and going against healthy vampires...well, not a good scenario. Placing a hand on his shoulder, she whispered, "Let me go talk to them. Maybe I can distract them or get one to leave. You aren't back to full strength."

"No." He growled. "Let me handle this. I need something to pound into the ground."

"Vampires are twice as strong as you."

"And I'm twice as pissed as they are. That's got to count for something. Not to mention I have the element of surprise." Striding forward, he walked up to the loading dock casually as if he was supposed to be there and grabbed one of the heavy sacks the first guy was unloading. He dropped it on the metal cart waiting to receive it. Sian walked over as if to help, too, when Taz grabbed a long carton, something heavy, if the rippling of his muscles was anything to go by, and swung it up, smashing the first guy on the chin. Hard.

Mouth open, Sian watched the vampire drop in place silently—except for the slam of body against floor. Holy shit. Taz had an arm on him.

"Hey." The second vampire lumbered over. Bigger, uglier, and from the looks of him, meaner, this asshole's fangs protruded at an odd angle. She couldn't help staring. He should have gotten those fixed. She suspected he liked the reaction they caused.

"Shit." Sian raced in as the vampire jumped Taz, sending the two rolling to the ground. Spinning around, she searched for a weapon to use. Grunting sounds filled the air as the two men fought it out. Grabbing a long pole against the far wall, she turned, waiting for her opportunity. That's when she saw the first male stir. Racing over, she swung out and kicked him up the side of the head. He went down again. Good. Asshole.

She turned back to the fighting pair in time to see Taz take a direct hit on the chin. He shook his head, squared his stance, and shot off his right fist in an uppercut that actually lifted the vampire off his feet and into the wall at the side.

She blinked in shock, her gaze going from the vampire's comical downward slide to Taz, pumped in front of her.

His fat grin beamed at her. She couldn't do anything more than stare at him in astonishment. "Wow."

"Boxing."

She raised an eyebrow. She hadn't known. He strode to the train, calling back, "Any idea if this is manned or automatic?"

"I'd say automatic like so much else here. There's probably a button or lever to engage the return trip, or else it's computerized with a pre-set time."

Taz headed to the front of the linked cars the size of carts and checked the digital readout. Glancing back at the man he'd tossed against the wall, he eyed the clothes he wore. "Give me a hand. We have fifteen minutes before the train is scheduled to leave. Just time enough to get better dressed." He jumped down and raced to the fallen vampire. Unbuttoning the lab coat, Taz pointed to the several large stainless steel containers on wheels on the loading dock. "Do I want to know what's in those?"

She shuddered. "They're too small for blood, and I don't want to open them to find out more."

"They'd be proof of what's going on around here. Maybe we should try taking one with us."

She eyed them. "I don't know. They aren't exactly portable." Sian went to work stripping off the guy's jeans while Taz removed his own lab coat and pulled the vampire's t-shirt over his head. Within minutes, he was fully dressed and looked remarkably like the downed vampire. "Let's go."

"What about him?" Sian eyed the man she'd kicked in the head. "Shouldn't we drag them off somewhere?"

"Not if it means losing our ride." True enough, a short warning sound came from the front cart. "Hurry up. Get on."

Taz reached out and snagged her hand, tugging her forward as he jumped onto the small train, just as it started to pull away. Shouts sounded as the door behind them opened. Sian caught sight of several goons pouring onto the loading docks as the train rounded the corner out of sight.

Sian shuddered. "Do you think they saw us?"

"I don't know. I hope not," he murmured against her hair. "They shouldn't have been able to."

"No, but they saw the men we left behind. They won't be long in following us." She stared anxiously behind them. "They could probably run faster than this train."

Just then the little train slowed down, rolling to a complete stop.

"No. No. Don't stop." Taz raced to the front of the car and started pushing buttons.

"They must have a control box back at the loading dock."

"With a kill switch." He punched several buttons but nothing responded. No lights, no codes flashed, nothing. "There should still be a way to control it from here."

Sian raced through their options. "They're going to be here any minute."

"Yes. We can do this."

"Depends how many come. Maybe we should run?" Sian looked up the long winding tunnel ahead. "What's the chance of escaping in the tunnel?"

"They're just going to hop on the train and chase us down."

"Damn." Of course they were. She wasn't thinking clearly. To have come so close and not get away didn't bear thinking about."

"Any idea how many will come after us?" Taz sounded distracted.

"No. They have dozens they could call on from the warehouse. Could be two or twenty."

He spun around to stare at her, then shook his head and went back to opening containers.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for weapons. Something to help even the odds."

"I might be able to help with that."

He turned slowly to face her. She held up her hands and let her nails slide out and down. Then her fangs.

And once again he surprised her.

He grinned. "Is this where you finally tell me that you're a vampire?"

"What?" Shock slowly filtered through her stunned brain. Her nails retracted on their own. "You knew?"

"Of course. Do you think I'm stupid?" Deep dark chocolate eyes glared down at her. "You never ate, rarely slept at night, alabaster skin? I am a doctor. I understood right from the beginning."

"You knew?" Her world spun. "You already knew and you accepted it?" Her voice rose at the end. All she'd done, the pain she'd put them both through—and she hadn't needed to?

"I was waiting for you to tell me the truth."

She searched his gaze. "And here I thought I was saving you. That you'd be better off without me. You knew and you didn't care?"

"Of course not. I love you."

There it was. He loved her. Therefore, he accepted her.

So simple. "I am such an idiot."

"I'm not going to argue that." He nodded behind them. "At least not now. Don't suppose you have something big in your vampire bag of tricks for a situation like this, do you?"

"Shit." She watched five large male vampires approach in full fighting form. "They're out for blood."

"They've had all of mine that they're going to get."

"They won't stop this time. We've tricked them. This is a fight to death."

"Good. I'm ready to kick some vampire butt. Except, you don't die easily like humans, do you?"

"No. Sunshine. Ultra violet light, silver, or cut off their heads."

He shot her a disbelieving look. "Wow. You don't make it easy for me, huh?"

Sian hopped off the small train. "Nope. We have only one predator—humans. I'll take out the two in front. They're the leaders."

"Two?"

"Yeah, watch." Sian walked over toward the two men, her own fangs and claws out. The first man reached for her. Like shifting sand, she slid to the side, out of the way. The second man had her in seconds. She smiled and slipped her right hand into her pocket to retrieve her spare needle. This one, full of a toxic substance in case Taz had been turned, was guaranteed to take out anyone, human or vampire, for a very long time. She was hoping the one dose could do two men. Palming it, she stabbed the hairy forearm tight against her throat.

"Shit. You fucking bitch." His arm dropped away. "She stabbed me. With a fucking needle."

"Quit being a baby. Maybe she just wants to take some of your blood"

The second vamp, just as big and as nasty looking as the man Taz had dropped back at the loading station, lunged and grabbed her. Sian let him. Then stabbed the rest of the contents of the syringe into his arm.

"Yeah, and I save some for you, too, asshole."

"Shit. What is that stuff."

"Coraltinoxalate."

He frowned and shook his head as if to clear it. "Whaaaa...t." He collapsed forward, his face smacking against the train tracks.

Sian checked both men on the ground. The first man taking longer to go out as he'd gotten the smaller dose.

Taz. She spun toward the train, to realize Taz wasn't on it. He was beating the crap out of two vampires. She stared in amazement as he used kicks and blocks she'd never seen. Boxing, he'd said. There had to be more to it than that. No human took on vampires as easily as he was doing. She frowned. He was human, right? Sure, he was. He had to be. She knew that. Then how...

"Hey bitch." Closed in a vice like grip, Sian struggled to get free. So mesmerized by Taz's fighting skills, she'd forgotten the fifth asshole. Without warning, his teeth sank into her throat. She cried out in agony and fear. This couldn't happen. She fought back, using elbows, knees and heels, but he countered her every move. His fangs dug deeper. He'd be able to rip her throat out with the grip he had on her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Taz take a brutal blow to the chin. His head flipped up and back and he went down hard.

No. Not fair. They'd come so close freedom. It couldn't end here. She couldn't let it. Letting her weight fall toward the ground as if unconscious, she pulled her attacker off balance. Twisting free, she spiked her nails into his eyes, gouging, digging and finally popping them free of their sockets. He backed up, bellowing like a bull moose, his hands slapping over his eyes.

"My eyes, my eyes. She fucking blinded me."

"They'll heal... eventually. Or, maybe not." She stood up shakily, her hand attempting to staunch the blood seeping from her own throat. "But that's nothing to what I'll do to you if you come after us. I'll make sure you're staked for the early morning sun, asshole. We are leaving. Follow us at your own risk."

The big bull vampire shuddered, his head turning, tracking, following her voice. For the moment, he was of little threat. She spun around looking for Taz, to find him once again standing, his chest heaving as he stared at the vampires on the ground. Three of them. She raced over. "Taz, are you alright? Are you hurt?"

He couldn't get any words out. He reached out and pulled her tight against his heaving chest. "I will be. Shit. I'm so out of shape."

She pulled back slightly to stare up at him in astonishment. "Huh? You just fought three vamps. I doubt you could do better anyway."

"Four."

"What?" She spun around, still held in the circle of his arms, to find Terrance, the lecher orderly, crumpled in a heap off to the side.

"I'm glad you're on my side, Taz. I never even saw those last two arrive."

He reached a hand to her head, tilting it so he could see the rip in her throat. "Hospital for you, my dear."

She shook her head, then winced. "No," she said hoarsely. "This will heal. Let's go before any more of these assholes come."

"Good idea."

Exhausted, the two stared at the small train, then down at the long tunnel ahead of them. "Walk? Drive?"

"Is driving an option? I want out as fast as I can."

"Walking will buy us a little time, maybe. Their control panel should tell them if the train is moving away from the warehouse. This way, they'll think these assholes are handling the situation. Won't come looking for a while yet."

Sian grimaced. "Walk it is." She glanced back at the mess of unconscious and injured vampires. They were her own kind, yet she felt nothing for them. "What about them? Kill them or leave them?"

He hugged her tight, then stepped back with his arm around her shoulders, tugging her down the tracks. "Regardless of how tempting, killing them isn't going to make any of this right."

Sian looked up at the beloved face. How could he, after all he'd suffered, still hold true to his high morals? "Honestly? You don't think they deserve death for what they did to you?"

"Not if there is another way." His firm tone brooked no argument.

Curious and a little envious of his clear cut moral ground, she had to push. "And if they are waiting for us at the end of this ride? What then?"

"The same thing as we've just done if we can. And if not... then death it is. But only if there's no other option."

"They're going to be waiting for us on the other end. You know that, right?"

"Then maybe they will be the ones in for a surprise." He pulled a phone stick out of the pants. "We aren't entirely helpless. With this, we can set up a rescue of our own."

Walking steadily, Sian watched and listened as Taz called several of the power people he knew. She, in theory, could call someone, too. Only she didn't know whom to trust. A year ago, she'd have said there was no trusting a human. Now, she wondered at the reverse. Could she trust any vampire?

They moved forward. Hands linked. The mileage passed quickly. Taz had shifted her world. She owed him so much. And now, they might make it out of this alive, after all. In fact, Taz had arranged for a tactical party to head for the tunnel entrance even as they spoke. This stage of the war would be over soon.

Then the real work would begin. Helping those poor people—in what could be a long and painful process. If they could be helped. Some of them had been in stasis too long. Nerve tissue had deteriorated, muscle tissue had wasted away to nothing. She didn't know what, if anything, they could do for them. It would probably take months if not years to sort out this mess. At least now it could be sorted out.

And maybe she could sleep in peace again, wrapped in Taz's arms, and without all those faces haunting her dreams. She smiled, a tiny intimate smile. Maybe that intimate Halloween party could happen after all.

"Thank you for finding me. For saving me."

Surprised, she looked up to see he was speaking to her. She swallowed hard. Her heart in her throat, she stared at the man who'd given her so much. "I had to. Life without you... well... let's just say, I wasn't too interested in living it alone."

She reached up and dropped a warm kiss on his chin. "When you disappeared and I knew the worst, my goal was to rescue you or perish in the process."

He stopped and spun her around, pulling her close. "And now? Before we walk out of this tunnel and finish this hell? And now?"

Caught by the heat in his gaze, she smiled. "And now, I wouldn't wish to be anywhere else, but in your arms."

"And yet you were prepared to leave me. You pushed me away." Deep brown eyes gazed into her own, searching for the truth, needing the reassurance that she'd be there for him.

It hurt that she'd done that to him. "The situation scared me. I loved you so much. I didn't want you to lose everything. You are human. And I... well, I'm like them... vampire."

"You're nothing like them." He tilted her chin so he could stare deeper into her eyes. "Don't ever say that. What we have is special. We'll work out the problems whatever they are... just don't run off on me again."

"Never."

He lowered his head and sealed her promise with a kiss.
