Chapter 7 — Nosferatu

IT WAS HALLOWEEN. Even though the house was nowhere near any others, and the road east of the house was just an access road, everyone went all-out to decorate. They loved Halloween, and I could see the fun they had in it. For them, it was not make-believe—but I was glad they weren't afraid to make light of things that were actually real.

The town of Willard was holding a "trunk-or-treat" for kids, so the girls and I decorated one of the truck beds with spider webs, pumpkins, and pretend ghouls and mummies. We also had an empty coffin on a stand next to the truck. Ray dressed up as a werewolf. Dan was a vampire. They told me that Mike was usually the one to dress as a vampire, but since he was confined to his room, Dan decided to take on the role. Wendy and I went as zombies; Claire dressed up like a witch.

Normally, newcomers like myself wouldn't have been able to leave the property so soon—but those boundaries didn't seem to apply to me, and it was clear Sylvio wasn't bothered by that. His hold on the others' minds was strong enough that they could leave for a while, but they were always compelled to return.

The trunk-or-treat was held along the street next to the city park. Ray was helping out with serving the chili and hot dogs, and the ladies and I were in the lineup with other vehicles, handing out candy from the back of the pickup.

We also had a coffin on a stand next to the truck, but it was empty. Dan had planned to play the vampire in it, but the team serving food was shorthanded so he left to help them. The line of kids was about halfway through, and we were having a great time. Then, I saw a gap in the crowd. People were staring at something.

As the crowd parted, I saw a man striding our way. In the dark, I couldn't make out who it was. There were only enough overhead streetlights to see a little way. As the man drew nearer, I recognized his walk. It was Sylvio.

Although he was not in costume—not really, anyway—he wore a suit and cape. The collar of the cape rode high around his neck, just like Dracula's. This was who he was; there was nothing "pretend" about him. Sylvio was in full vampire form, and even though everyone there knew it was Halloween, they could also sense that something different, something dangerous, was walking among them. They gave him space and pulled their children closer instinctively.

As Sylvio neared our spot, Jerry, the mayor of the town, came out of the crowd. He knew Sylvio—or at least he thought he did. Sylvio had helped the city out a time or two in the past, and his house had been there for a very long time. It occurred to me then that sometimes, truth makes the best disguise. Everyone in town believed Sylvio's house was a refuge for people who needed to escape from whatever their lives had been before. Nobody questioned why those living there came and went; it just made sense.

"Awesome costume," Jerry said to Sylvio. He held out his hand and the tension that had been building in the crowd following Sylvio's appearance subsided a bit.

"Nice to see you," Sylvio replied, shaking Jerry's hand.

Jerry noticed Sylvio's claws. "Wow, that's an impressive makeup job! Pretty cool." He smiled, and as Sylvio gazed back with blood-red eyes, I saw the smile on Jerry's face falter.

"Thank you. Are you a bachelor still, or has Linda come back yet?" Asking about his wife served to distract Jerry, pulling his attention away from Sylvio's claws. Jerry smiled broadly. According to Claire,

Jerry's daughter was having triplets, thanks to the magic of fertility drugs, and his wife Linda had gone up to Billings to help out.

"Nope, still on my own and getting tired of ordering take-out."

Sylvio smiled, fangs flashing white in the dim light. Jerry's smile faltered again, but then someone took him by the elbow muttering something about hot dog buns, and he walked away with them.

The people in the crowd seemed to hesitate a step when they saw Sylvio, and automatically left a bubble of space around him, but that didn't stop the kids from circling around to get candy from Wendy, Claire, and I.

"Hey, Sylvio," Claire said. "The coffin is empty at the moment, you gonna climb in?" She grinned from ear to ear.

"I think I'll pass on that," Sylvio said in an indulgent tone. He was feeling reckless and bold.

I thought then about how much he hid, even from those of us in his inner circle. He didn't wear fancy clothes at the house, and he never appeared in vampire form unless he was feeding. I didn't think he could feed and *not* transform; it was not a choice. But this night, he was not hiding his true self. He radiated power and a sense of menace. I was rarely afraid of him, but as he was now, with no disguise, he was truly frightening.

I scanned the crowd filled with werewolf, witch, and vampire costumes. I wondered how many times in the past I had been oblivious to reality, how many times I had not seen what was right in front of me. It was so clear to me now that Sylvio was something *other*.

He stayed with us for about an hour, then left to make an appearance at his other two houses. As he stood next to the truck—offering a slight bow and saying "Good evening" to the passing children and

adults, complete with a Romanian accent—I witnessed them all ignoring their instincts. There was doubt and alarm behind each of their eyes, but when they looked at Sylvio, they simply ignored the warning their subconscious minds were giving them.

I realized then that I had been just as blind as they were. How many times in the past had I encountered the preternatural and been so totally unaware?

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It was early evening, one week later. Sylvio had dropped by only a couple of times that week. In that time, he hadn't fed from any of us. It wasn't "our week" to have him, which was an odd feeling, but it was also much more relaxing when he wasn't around. When he was with us, everyone's attention would be focused on him; we were all distracted and excited. This week had been uneventful and quiet. I was getting used to living there, and hadn't needed my pain pills at all that morning.

I got along well with everyone except Mike, but it wasn't personal. He was gruff with nearly all of us and rarely spoke, even when Sylvio was home. Dan was the only one who would go into Mike's room. They had always gotten along well, and Mike wasn't as rude to Dan as he was to the rest of us.

The two would spend time together in the evenings. Sometimes, when Mike's door was open, I could hear them talking, or playing games on the computer. Each time Dan would leave Mike's room, he tried to put on a cheerful face. It was his nature. But I could tell that inside, he was worried and sad.

We had just finished dinner and were heading into the play room when I felt an unmistakable wave of rage behind me. I turned around to see Mike standing in the kitchen, his eyes glowing red.

I felt the unseen beings surround me protectively. Ever since I had learned the truth about Sylvio, they had made their presence much more obvious. Before I knew what was happening, Mike ran for me. I stood stock still like a deer in the head lights, my feet frozen to the spot. I was too afraid to speak, but in my mind I cried out, “Stop! Don’t do this!”

That’s when a strange thing happened. Mike halted suddenly. He stopped in his tracks and blinked. There was confusion written on his face.

Dan moved quickly to his side and gripped his shoulder. “Mike!” he said. “You can fight this.”

Mike turned on him in an instant. He wrapped one arm around Dan’s shoulders and pinned his arms to his sides. Mike’s other hand had Dan by the hair, pulling his head back, exposing his throat. I saw small fangs for a moment, then they disappeared as they sank into the vein on Dan’s neck.

Dan stumbled backward into the barstools and crashed to the floor. Mike followed him down, still fastened to his neck and drinking greedily.

I could hear Claire on her phone, shouting into it. “We need Sylvio right now!” She listened to whoever was on the other line and her commanding demeanor collapsed. “When did they start?” she asked. The answer made her shoulders slump and her face crumple. She hung up the phone and said, “Sylvio just started feeding over there.”

Tonight was a Friday. Feeding would not be all he would do with one of them. It would take some time before he could come back.

The rest of us stood in silence, watching in horror as Dan began to grow pale, his face becoming slack and still. Time stretched. Mike’s hand was wrapped around Dan’s shoulders, his fingers deformed, not quite claws but not quite fingers. Dan did not struggle. I didn’t know if that was because he’d been told

not to, or because Mike had him in a trance. There was no look of fear in Dan's eyes, but I could feel his terror.

Finally, Dan's eyes lost their focus and they rolled backward. He was panting for breath, his throat rattling as he fought for life. We had been told by Sylvio not to interfere, but I couldn't just stand there. I crossed the room slowly and put a hand on Mike's shoulder, willing him to slow down, to stop. His shoulder tensed at my touch. He didn't stop feeding, but his pull on Dan's neck slowed.

The next thing I knew, Ray was at my side, shaking Mike's shoulders. "Stop!" he shouted, "you're killing him!"

Ray grabbed a fistful of Mike's hair and pulled. As quick as a snake, Mike turned on Ray. A look of triumph swept over Ray's face as Mike's fangs sank into his neck—he had baited Mike in order to save Dan.

Ray stumbled backward into the living room and the two of them sank to the floor. Mike was feeding faster from Ray than he had fed from Dan, and he growled as he drank. The liquid in his throat made a revolting gurgling sound.

Minutes ticked slowly by. Ray's skin had turned a sickly gray, his lips blue. Soon, he began to pant. It was then that I realized there was no sound coming from Dan. His breathing had stopped, and he lay still and quiet.

There was a sudden blur of motion to my left. Mike flew through the air, crashing to the floor next to Dan, his head making a sick *thunk* on the tile. Sylvio pinned Mike to the floor. At the same time, he placed his bleeding wrist over Dan's slack, open mouth. Nothing happened for a few seconds. Then, Dan's lips clamped down on Sylvio's arm and he began to drink. In the silence, I could hear him taking in big mouthfuls. My stomach turned.

Sylvio's face was tight and his eyes blazed. His claws sank into Mike's neck and a trickle of blood pooled around them. He let Dan drink for several minutes.

I saw that Sylvio's feet were bare, ending in claws just like those on his hands. All he wore was black sweatpants, and I was shocked to see several deep scars running across his back. Some were long and straight like those a sword would make, and had little streaks on them from someone stitching them up and doing a poor job of it. There were other scars all over his back—most were just an inch or two long.

Sylvio's skin was mottled, too. I assumed this was from the time he had lain in the sun after falling at the base of the cliff. His clothes had apparently protected some of him. Now, even though his skin was tan, some spots were darker than others. He also had several shorter scars on his arms. They looked like defensive marks.

Along his right side, just below his rib cage, there was a pronounced dent and a large, puckered scar. All of the stories I had read said that vampires remained as they were when they died. This meant that all of those scars had been made when Sylvio was a mortal. Clearly, his life as a soldier had not been easy.

Sylvio finally told Dan to stop. He licked his own wrist, then licked Dan's neck, which had started to bleed again. Then he turned to Mike and sank his fangs into his neck. Mike had been lying still, but the moment Sylvio struck, he convulsed and thrashed, clawing and kicking. His bare feet made a *rat-a-tat* sound on the tile, but his efforts were fruitless. They had no more effect on Sylvio than a buzzing fly.

I glanced at Dan. He looked dramatically better; some color had returned to his cheeks, although he was far too pale, and he still lay unconscious. Sylvio drank from Mike until he lay limp. None of us dared to move.

When he was finished, Sylvio went to Ray, still holding Mike's limp body by the neck. It curved in a lifeless arc as he was dragged across the tile. Sylvio held his wrist over Ray's mouth and repeated what he had done for Dan, until Ray's eyes fluttered open and he stared in wild-eyed terror. The emotion I felt from him shocked me, bringing me out of the trance I'd been in as I watched the horrific scene. Sylvio whispered something into Ray's ear. Almost immediately, Ray's fear began to subside.

Being careful not to disturb them, I dampened a washcloth under the kitchen sink and began to clean the blood from Dan's neck. My actions brought the others to life and snapped them out of their stupor, into action.

Lisa sat down hard on the floor, her legs too wobbly to hold her. She put her face in her hands and began to sob quietly. Claire came to help me with Dan, bringing another damp washcloth to clean the blood from his chest. Wendy was still frozen in place, staring at Sylvio. For the very first time since she'd come here, she was afraid of him.

I locked eyes with Sylvio as he licked the wounds on Ray's neck to stop the bleeding. I felt an equal mix of sorrow and rage coming from him. He stood, still holding Mike by the neck—the weight of the body no more to him than a doll's—and walked across the living room, past the piano, to the basement door. Mike's feet thumped on each stair as Sylvio dragged him down. Then there was no more sound, aside from Lisa's muted sobs.

I realized belatedly that Wendy was in shock. I took a blanket from the couch in the living room and wrapped it around her shoulders. I guided her to the couch and sat her down, then Claire and I continued to clean up Ray and Dan. Both were still breathing too shallowly, but their hearts beat a steady rhythm and some color had returned to their cheeks. Ray drifted back into unconsciousness while we washed his neck.

As we finished wiping blood off the tile, I wondered how we were going to move Dan and Ray to their bedrooms. At that moment, I felt another shockwave of fear from Wendy. I turned to look at her and saw Sylvio was standing in the living room, watching us. He must have appeared there—either that, or he had moved too softly to be heard.

Without a word, he picked up Dan and carried him to his room. I followed. Sylvio left and returned with Ray, setting him down beside Dan. It was a king-size bed, so there was plenty of space for both of them.

I removed their bloody shirts and covered them with blankets I found in the closet. Claire came in with two IV bags and racks. She deftly inserted the IVs into their arms. She left and came back a few minutes later with a syringe, pumping its contents into each of the IV tubes. I guessed it was a painkiller of some sort, maybe a muscle relaxer. I didn't ask. As I watched over them, they relaxed into a deep sleep. Sylvio also watched in silence. I wanted to go to him, to ease the pain I felt from him, but I knew he would reject it.

Claire was the one brave enough to break the silence. "Do I need to do this for Mike, too?"

I held my breath, afraid of the answer. Sylvio looked at her for several long seconds, then said, "Yes, but don't go down there without Rachel."

She gave me a puzzled look. I followed her out of the room. I didn't know what Sylvio meant by that, either. I gathered a couple of blankets while Claire took more supplies from a cabinet in the hall.

The basement was a large, spacious room. There was plush carpeting on the floor and a worn but comfortable-looking couch, with chairs facing a blank, white wall. There was a projector between two of the chairs, and I realized the setup was for watching movies on the wall.

There were cabinets behind the couch and chairs that held a vast movie and music collection, but it was what I saw to the right of the door that shocked me. It was a barred cage with a queen-size bed in the center of it. Mike lay on top of the bed, rolled over onto his side where Sylvio had left him, his legs hanging off the edge. The bars surrounding him had an odd shine to them.

The cage door was standing open. We took Mike's bloody clothes off, cleaned him up as we had the others, and settled him under the covers. He seemed in worse shape than the other two. I noticed that his fingers had returned to normal. He remained unconscious throughout, even when Claire hooked him up to the IV. He fell into a deep sleep, just as the other two had, and his breathing finally slowed to a steady rhythm. Before we left, Claire locked the cage. It was an old-fashioned key, the kind with big, square teeth.

When we returned upstairs, Sylvio was leaning against the island in the kitchen, watching Lisa sob. He held Kita in his arms and was petting her tiny head absently. Lisa, still on the kitchen floor, looked up at us and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. She stood and took a couple of shuddering breaths, then glared at Sylvio.

Sylvio bent and set Kita down. "Lisa," he began, "it's…" But he never got the chance to finish the sentence. Lisa lunged at him, intending to beat him with her fists, but Sylvio held her wrists so she wouldn't hurt herself.

"You *let* this happen!" she screamed. "You *knew* he would go after one of us, and now he's nearly killed his best friend! How could you leave us as bait and risk our lives when all you had to do was lock him up?"

Lisa struggled in Sylvio's grasp, then gave up and collapsed. She sank to the floor, sobbing again.

“Perhaps he’ll be horrified enough at what he’s done to decide not to be the monster he’s becoming,” Sylvio said.

So that was why Sylvio hadn’t put Mike in the cage when he first started transforming. He’d gambled our lives for the chance to save Mike’s.

Sylvio walked over and sat on the couch next to Wendy. She looked at him like a rabbit in a snare. He petted her hair and spoke soft words I couldn’t hear, until she finally relaxed and leaned on him.

Lisa got up from the kitchen floor and went to her bedroom, slamming the door shut.

I sank onto the piano bench next to Claire, feeling done in. When Wendy fell asleep, Sylvio lay her down gently, then walked to the kitchen island and picked up Claire’s phone. He typed in a number and told the person on the other end that he needed a witch at his house in Utah. He listened for a minute, said thanks, and hung up.

“They’ll be here in an hour,” he said. He didn’t elaborate on who “they” were.

So many questions were racing through my mind, but I was too tired to ask them. I looked at the clock and was shocked. Little more than an hour had gone by since Mike had attacked.

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Sylvio, Claire, and I waited on the porch for them to arrive. None of us were in the mood to talk, so we just watched the horses play in the pasture. It was a crisp evening, and the horses felt good. The sun had set and the light was fading when the visitors arrived.

An old Chevy truck pulled up to the side of the house, tripping the motion sensor and turning on the porch light. The passenger door opened and a raven-haired woman stepped out. She had a slight build and looked like a Native American. Her face was pretty, but not striking; her eyes were very dark, almost black.

The driver exited next. He stood over six feet, with wavy brown hair and a broad, handsome face. He moved with catlike grace, reminding me of Sylvio. I couldn't sense the emotions from either of them, but I could sense that the spirits at the house were focused intently on the woman, as if anticipating something.

Shadow and Missy jumped up and growled at the driver, the hair standing up on their backs. He looked at them with an unconcerned expression. As he continued to stare at the dogs, their growls abruptly stopped. They ducked their heads, turned, and hid under the bench I was sitting on. They peered out from underneath and made no more sounds.

Sylvio was standing at the top of the steps. Claire stood leaning on the porch railing in front of me, obscuring me from the view of the visitors.

The raven-haired woman moved to greet Sylvio, but the moment she saw me, her eyes went wide. A wave of energy filled the space around us; my skin tingled. Suddenly, Sylvio flew backward against the porch wall, his legs splayed out in front of him, his back pinned to the wall. The windows of the house rattled and I could feel pain blossoming in him.

"What have you done?" the woman snarled at Sylvio.

"She doesn't know," he croaked through a clenched jaw, his voice tight.

I was dumbfounded. What was going on? Why would she attack him without provocation? *How* had she thrown him without touching him? I felt I had to help him.

I jumped off the bench and started across the porch, arms outstretched, intending to push her away or distract her. Before I had even reached her, the wave of energy reversed and she flew backward off the steps, landing hard next to the front tire of the truck.

In two quick strides, the driver leapt up the porch steps and lifted me off the ground. His fingertips dug into the flesh of my throat. Moments earlier, his emotions had been unreadable. I could certainly feel them now. He was enraged at what had just happened. He was not just her driver; he was her lover. As I dangled in his grasp, I got the impression he could snap my neck like a twig.

Sylvio seemed unable to move. I could feel his pain, and that gave me courage. He needed help, feeble as any help I could offer might be. I focused my anger on the driver, lifting my knee to kick him in the groin, but before I could, he dropped me like he'd been scalded. There was a look of shock on his face.

I landed and fell backward onto my butt in front of Sylvio. He started to chuckle. He was no longer in pain, but he remained pressed against the wall.

The woman picked herself up off the ground and brushed the dust off her jeans. She appeared unhurt. Her eyes danced furiously between Sylvio and me. "What you have done is not allowed, vampire. I see no humor in this."

"It's too late to change things now," Sylvio said. "She won't survive a month without my blood to cure her, anyway. Your magic may heal broken bones and stitch up fresh wounds, but it can do nothing against a disease like hers."

"You would risk the lives of thousands for this one?" She glared at him but moved no closer.

"You would let one of *yours* go so easily? One with power such as she has?"

What were they talking about? Claire was staring at me with wide eyes. Lisa and Wendy had come to the door to see what the commotion was, and were now staring at me with shocked faces. The driver was rubbing his palm and looking at the raven-haired woman with questions in his eyes.

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded.

Sylvio waved a hand in their direction. “You’re like her,” he said, his eyes dancing with mirth. “A witch.”