The Vampire’s Photograph

Oliver Nocturne

Book One
Kevin Emerson
For Annie, Chloe, and Hannah, my first readers
Destination: Seattle!

From the Half-Light Guide to Human Cities

If you are looking for a place to dwell in the human world, look no further than Seattle.
A bustling, modern city, Seattle is filled with glossy buildings, fine restaurants, and many, many coffee shops. It sits on the shores of Puget Sound, an extension of the great Pacific Ocean, and the breeze often carries an agreeable aroma of brine and decay.

It rains quite a bit here, so most days are pleasantly dreary. You can count on
gloomy evenings and dawns for your commute. The sun does appear now and then and, it’s true, summer can be unbearable with the seemingly endless sunlight, but this is more than made up for by long and gloriously dark winters.

The humans here are friendly but not nosy. While they love a brief chat in the coffee line, they have little
interest in your politics, home life, or personal habits. They won’t ask about your complexion, or do anything tedious like invite you to a dinner party. It is easy enough to be among them and stay unnoticed. Also, due to their excellent fitness and healthy eating habits—fresh salmon and craft beer; many vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free alternatives; and of
course the city’s near-fanatical obsession with kale—*your* dining experience will be world class.

The school system is excellent. The public schools are in session most nights from September to June, using the human buildings, many of which are charmingly cold and creepy. The sewers are in fine shape, with no pesky human mass
transit clogging up the works, and underground shopping opportunities abound.

All in all, if a dank, dark, unobserved existence is what you’re after, Seattle may be the ideal city for you.
AT THE CENTER OF everything, stood a Gate.

The Gate had never been opened. It had been made, and then shut. Some said that the sound of it closing began the universe. No one knew what was on the other side of it. Nor did anyone know what would happen if the Gate was
opened. No one was even completely sure what the Gate did, yet all agreed that it was very important, maybe the most important thing in the universe. Why it was important, though, was the subject of a debate as old as the Gate itself.

Most believed that the Gate was not meant to be opened, that keeping it closed was the point of everything.
Some even believed that opening it would end the universe, by unhinging the many worlds and sending them crashing down on one another. Those who believed this were also usually the ones who found the universe to be tolerable the way it was. And they had it easy. Since the Gate seemed to be forever shut, few of them were worried.
But others wondered: Why make a gate? Why not just a wall? Wasn’t a gate meant to be opened? Thus, they believed that opening the Gate was the point of everything. That if it was opened, a better universe would finally begin, and all of the unfair suffering would end. Those who believed this were also usually the ones who were suffering, whether
at the hands of ruthless leaders, backward societies, or fate.

Yet they had been very busy. They had tried many times to open the Gate and failed, but doing what seems to be impossible requires a great deal of learning, perseverance, and vigilance. So, they studied the signs and oracles, and waited.

Until it was finally time to
try again.

For the first time in a span longer than anyone could rightly measure, someone approached the Gate. He came on the only road. The first sound to break the silence surrounding the Gate was that of hooves crunching on the road’s crushed volcanic glass surface. Wooden wheels whined to a halt.
A black stagecoach had arrived.

From it stepped a tall man in a crisp, pin-striped suit. He wore a bow tie and a fedora hat, and looked as if he’d just left a respectable banking institution. His eyes, while wizened and old, were surrounded by an ageless face, his features as clean and smooth as his hat and suit. He certainly did not bear the
wear and tear one would expect after the long journey to Nexia, the center world of the universe, where the Gate stood.

The gentleman surveyed its striking golden form, which shone brightly against a backdrop of pure black and starlight. There was no atmosphere in Nexia, and so the tight clusters of galaxies, novae, and planets sparkled in
the dark like glass ornaments, seeming to hang almost within reach. Rings of dust and solar flare arced overhead. Wormholes spiraled away into the black.

The gentleman looked off to either side of the Gate. Ripples of blood red land spread away to the horizon. Marble columns and spires of jade and amethyst stuck out of the red rock here and there,
as if the ground had frozen in mid-stir. There had once been a civilization here, in a time before anyone could remember. Some believed that it was this civilization that had created the Gate, then departed through it. Some even called these people the Architects. Those who sought to open the Gate also wanted to ask the Architects a few questions,
ideally at the point of a deadly instrument.

The gentleman turned to the two zombie horses that had borne his coach here and gave them a slap, sending them away. He watched them go, the stagecoach clattering behind them, until there was only silence, then he turned and walked toward the Gate. He stopped just inside its brilliant aura and bowed
deeply, with a respectful tip of his hat.

Thirty years passed.

Then the Gate spoke in the gentleman’s mind, Why come ye?

The gentleman smiled. I mean to open you, he thought back.

And who are ye who comes? the Gate asked.

I am Illisius, he replied.

I see, said the Gate.
Illisius put down his briefcase and sat, cross-legged, on the road.

Another twenty years went by.

You are patient, for a demon, the Gate observed.

I am waiting for someone, Illisius said. He pushed back his finely pressed cuff and checked his silver watch. Seven dials spun at different speeds. He’ll be here soon.
Ah, yes, the Gate agreed. The young vampire. Indeed, said Illisius. Silence resumed. Overhead, a wormhole siphoned off the debris of one of Nexia’s rings, spun it into a planet, and sent it away. Later, there was a pop, as one overwhelmed world cleaved in two. In the light of Nexia’s Gate, Illisius waited.
Chapter 1

The Intruder in the Mirror

OLIVER NOCTURNE HAD BEEN having trouble sleeping, which was why he first heard the intruder. He had been lying awake as usual one November dawn, tossing and turning, when a floorboard
had creaked somewhere upstairs. Going to investigate had seemed much more interesting than lying in bed with the worries that plagued him. Now, it was December, and the intruder was back for the third time. Oliver had expected someone else in his family to have noticed this morning visitor by now, but so far, he was the only one who knew.
Oliver had been having trouble sleeping for as long as he could remember. It had always been particularly bad around his birthday and Christmas, both of which were coming right up, but this year it was worse than ever. He was lying awake well into each day and waking up exhausted each evening.

Oliver was bothered most by one thought in particular:
There’s something wrong with me.

The problem was, Oliver didn’t know what that something was. He just knew that he never quite fit in with those around him, neither at home or at school. Oliver kept this feeling to himself, mainly because he was embarrassed. Vampires weren’t supposed to have these kinds of problems. And
if his older brother, Bane, ever found out, there would be no end to the torment.

The one thing that Oliver did know about his problem was that it seemed to be about his future. Oliver was thirteen in human years, which meant that it wouldn’t be too long now before he received his demon. But that happened to every young vampire, and his classmates talked about it like
it was the greatest thing. What kind of vampire wouldn’t want to get his demon? To finally be able to do the things adult vampires did, like Occupy animals and go out to the Friday Socials?

So there had to be something else about the future that was keeping him up day after day. Sometimes, he almost felt like he knew what it was...yet he could
never quite put his finger on it. He would chase his thoughts around, one, then the next, always feeling like some truth was just beyond his reach.

This morning, though, his awful insomnia had brought something interesting: The intruder was back. Oliver could hear the footsteps echoing from upstairs. He quietly slipped out of his
coffin and down to the stone floor. The underground crypt was silent, lit only by a faint crimson glow. Oliver’s parents, Phlox and Sebastian, were asleep together in a wide coffin beside his. Bane’s coffin was over by the wall, also shut tight. Oliver had heard his parents go to bed hours ago and heard Bane sneaking in after that.

He crossed the room and
started up a stone spiral staircase, leaving the crypt, which was the lowest level of his family’s underground home. His bare feet padded lightly on the stones, the slight ruffling of his pajamas the only other sound. The magmalight lanterns on the walls, teardrop-shaped crystal globes sitting in ornate lead sconces, had been drained for the day, so the staircase was
pitch-black, but that was no problem for keen vampire eyes.

Oliver reached the main floor, and peered into the dark kitchen. The titanium appliances hummed softly, but otherwise, all was still.

Another footstep sounded above.

Oliver continued up. The stairs ended on the next landing. In front of him was a
sleek steel door. He put his ear to it and heard more creaking steps from the other side. Technically, he wasn’t allowed up here…. But Oliver pressed a red button, and the door slid silently open.

There was a narrow space, and then the back of a broken, rusted refrigerator. It was leaning at an angle against the wall, wires and
coils hanging from it, like a great beast that had been clawed open. Oliver squeezed around the side of it—

And saw the human girl.

She was standing in the center of a large room. This was the ground floor of the abandoned house that sat atop Oliver’s home. The walls that had once separated the rooms of the house had been torn away, leaving a long, vacant
space cluttered with rubble and junk. The whole place was supposed to look run-down and unsafe. Phlox had taken great care to make it feel not only neglected, but forbidding—homeless people *could* sleep here, but why would they want to? A gang of kids *could* hang out here, but wasn’t there maybe a cooler place to go?

  Beams of gloomy Seattle
morning light angled in through two broken windows on either side of the front door. Dark burgundy wallpaper sagged from the walls, revealing pocked plaster and blooms of mold. A giant hole gaped just in front of the door. It wasn’t a real hole but a design trick Phlox had perfected. The girl hadn’t used the door, though. She always came in through
the window, using a set of thick plaid oven mitts to navigate the toothlike shards of broken glass.

She stood now, mitts under her arm, silently surveying the room’s contents. There was much to look at: In addition to the peeling wallpaper and bottomless hole, there was an ancient bathtub in the corner, full of putrid water and
reeking of rot. A slow, steady drip plinked into it from the sagging ceiling, where a broken chandelier hung cockeyed. In the other corner was an overturned dresser, its filthy clothes strewn into the brown puddles on the floor.

On the wall above the dresser hung a dingy painting in a tarnished, cracked frame. It was a portrait of a wiry, dour old man in a tweed suit,
with very little hair, and if one looked closely, even less skin. These details were mostly obscured by mold. His piercing eyes however, which seemed to glow with an unnatural amber light, remained bright; another one of Phlox’s special touches. The picture was of Oliver’s departed great-uncle, Renfeld.

And yet, of all these
unsettling things, each time the girl came, she spent the most time looking at the one thing that, as Sebastian had once explained to Oliver, no human could resist—the tall mirror leaning against the far wall, directly opposite Oliver’s perch behind the refrigerator. Dad had said that humans could never resist a mirror. They were drawn to them like moths to a flame.
The girl gazed into it now, having no idea that Oliver was watching her, because he had no reflection. Even if he’d had one, it would have been hard to see. The glass was covered with a thick film of grime, except for one circular area. The girl had cleaned this spot on her first visit. She reached up now and wiped the circle again with her cuff.
She was slightly shorter than him, wearing jeans, the same green puffy vest and maroon knit hat that she always wore, and, today, a turtleneck sweater with bright rainbow stripes that contrasted defiantly with the drab world around her. She stood with her hands on her hips, turning this way and that, every now and then reaching up and flicking at
her thick braid of brown hair. She made a silly face in the mirror, baring her soft, rounded human teeth and holding up her stubby human fingers as if they were claws. She almost laughed, but then sighed and slumped her shoulders.

As Oliver watched her, he felt a wave of guilt. He should have told his parents about the girl after her first
visit. He had planned to, but now she’d visited more than once and Oliver would end up getting in trouble, too. Phlox and Sebastian would want to know why he hadn’t told them immediately, and what would his answer be? That he’d been curious about what she was up to and wanted to figure out why she kept coming here? What kind of a vampire would have a
thought like that?

Bane would have more of a field day with this than with Oliver’s insomnia. Also, it was likely that Oliver’s parents would decide that this trespassing needed to be stopped in a more permanent way, and then Oliver would have nothing to distract him from his sleeplessness. Besides, this girl was harmless, wasn’t she? All she
ever did was come here, look around for a while, then leave —

Only now she did something different. She reached into her vest and pulled out a large black object that hung from her neck on a faded leather strap. It took Oliver a moment to recognize that it was a camera. He’d learned about it in school, a device that a human used to
capture an image. Vampires never used cameras. They painted oil portraits or drew charcoal sketches. In fact, Oliver’s parents had told him to avoid ever having his picture taken, but he wasn’t sure why. It couldn’t hurt him, like sunlight or a stake, at least as far as he knew.

The girl held the camera to her eye, slowly twisting the lens to focus, then pressed a
button. There was a click. She wound a small lever and looked through it again.

Oliver watched her turn slowly around, the camera clicking. Why would she be taking pictures of this place? Oliver’s family had lived here on Twilight Lane since he was very young. It was one of the streets in town where almost every house looked abandoned and run-down on
the surface, yet had a vampire home beneath it. These houses were never condemned or torn down, because Sebastian’s employer, the Half-Light Consortium, had vampires working undercover in important human jobs for the city. Whenever someone in the human public called for tearing down the decrepit houses on Twilight Lane,
some permit or legal document would get fouled up somewhere and set the process off by years. It was in ways like this that the vampires had built a society right under the humans’ noses. Sebastian said it hadn’t been that hard, because humans were very good at not noticing things they didn’t really want to know about. Also, people in Seattle were
notoriously not nosy about their neighbors. That, along with the gloom, was one of the main reasons why so many vampires lived here.

But this girl seemed pretty curious. Maybe she just liked cold, abandoned places. That would be weird for a human, but interesting.

As she continued snapping photos, Oliver slipped out from behind the
refrigerator and stepped to the wall. Putting both hands against the damp plaster, he took a deep, meditative breath.... A trace of whispers brushed across his mind, speaking in ancient vampire tongues. He felt a lightening in his feet and proceeded to scale the wall like a spider.

He’d only recently begun learning how to work with the forces. Climbing walls was
one of the early skills: a prelude to levitation. Vampires could do these things because they could sense forces from other worlds. From their very first years in school, vampires were taught that this world was only one of many, most of which weren’t so frustratingly physical and mortal. Each world had its own set of dimensions and
rules: some very similar to Earth, some very different. The forces of nearby worlds mingled through one another, and while a human could never sense them, vampires could. As Oliver’s teachers always put it, this was one of the many advantages that the undead had over the living.

When Oliver reached the top of the wall, he paused, concentrated further, then slid
up onto the ceiling. He crawled slowly forward, around the frayed rope that held the broken chandelier, until he was right above the girl. Now he could hear her breathing. It was a strange sound, so frail. Like it could stop at any time. Also, from this close, he could vividly smell her.

Humans barely had any idea that they had a scent but,
to a sensitive vampire nose, it acted as an all-in-one guide to their attitudes, hopes, and fears. In past visits, Oliver had sensed that this girl was frustrated, and beneath that, sad. Tonight, though, she was focused on what she was doing. She loved taking pictures. But she was nervous, too. This place scared her. Oliver could feel her pulse racing.
The girl took a step, and now she was just a little ahead of him. As she aimed the camera at the broken refrigerator, Oliver concentrated hard and let go with his hands, hanging down from his knees. His head ended up just a few inches behind the girl’s shoulder. He wanted to see the room as she was seeing it, albeit upside down. Then he noticed her
teardrop-shaped silver earring and reached for it. He didn’t think about what he was doing; it was second nature to vampires to collect artifacts and trinkets that interested them. He began gently pulling the earring free from her earlobe—

“Ahh!” she cried out, and flinched. Oliver flashed back up to the ceiling. The girl’s hand zipped through the
space he’d just occupied, flicking at her own ear, and knocking off the earring. It fell into a moldy crack in the floor. She spun around, scanning the room warily.

“Emalie!” A boy’s voice, a worried whisper-shout, came from outside. She had never brought anyone else along before. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Emalie replied.
She sounded scared, but also embarrassed.

“What happened?”

“What happened?” Emalie kept looking around the room. “Nothing!” she muttered.

And then her body froze, her breath catching in her throat, and she began to turn her head upward.

Oliver flattened himself against the ceiling. He
reached out through the forces and began to fade out of sight. Those who were true masters of spectralization could disappear completely. They literally pushed their matter into a parallel world, becoming invisible for a short while, but Oliver had just started learning this skill, so the best he could do was make himself into a sort of foggy shadow. Hopefully in
this gloom, that would be enough.

Emalie’s eyes reached the ceiling. She looked right at him...

Then she shook her head and looked away. She felt at her ear. “Shoot.” She peered at the floor in search of her earring.

Oliver relaxed and reappeared above her. There was no chance she’d find that
earring. He could barely see it.

The boy called again from outside. “We’re going to be late!”

“Dean! Hold on—” Emalie said.

Oliver heard Dean huff. Emalie gave up looking for the earring, then pulled another large contraption from her vest and affixed it to the top of the camera: a flash.
She peered into the eyepiece, twisted the lens, then depressed a button. The flash exploded, filling the room with blinding light. Oliver winced, feeling as if his eyes had been stretched too wide. He blinked over and over, brilliant green obscuring his view. The girl aimed the camera at the dresser. She focused. This time Oliver squinted, but the flash seared
his vision anyway.

Despite the green blobs in his eyes, he hung down behind her again and watched, fascinated, as she documented the whole room. It was lucky that she was using such an old camera. Because she had to look through an eyepiece, the view that she’d see would be bounced off a tiny mirror, and so even if she aimed the
camera right at him, Oliver would be invisible to her. Still, he didn’t plan on letting that happen—

Then, Emalie took a step back, and Oliver almost didn’t move in time. He shot back up to the ceiling and scrambled out of her way. He just avoided her, but his foot caught the rope holding the chandelier. There was a shrill clinking of glass—
Emalie whirled around, camera still to her eye, aiming right at him before he could react.

The flash exploded with light.

“Tsss!” Oliver threw an arm across his eyes. He tried to keep his concentration, to hang on to the forces, but he was losing his hold. His feet began to slip off the ceiling, and he hurled himself blindly
away. He arced across the room, slammed into the far wall, and fell straight into the bathtub with a tremendous splash.

Oliver hit the bottom hard and stayed there, panicked, as the water sloshed about. Once it calmed, he could see Emalie frozen in place, her eyes darting from the tub to the ceiling and around the room.
“I…is someone there?” she asked the empty room, her voice trembling.

*Stay still*, Oliver thought to himself. Since he didn’t need to breathe, he could stay in this tub all day, though it was unpleasantly cold. He watched from the safety of the dark, murky water as Emalie backed slowly toward the window, tucking her camera into her vest.
“Emalie!” he heard Dean call again. She slipped on her oven mitts and, when her back bumped into the wall, she turned and scrambled out, carelessly knocking shards of glass this way and that. “Ow!” she cried as the knee of her jeans ripped.

Oliver slowly slipped out of the tub and moved across the room, leaving sopping footprints on the floor. He
stopped at the edge of the gray daylight. Even on a gloomy, misting morning such as this, the light made him squint.

Emalie was retreating down the overgrown path though the spiderweb-laced yard. Dean stood in the narrow gap in the high hedge that surrounded the property. He was tall, with two backpacks hanging off his
lanky frame like he was a coat rack. Even from this distance, Oliver could smell the worry that Dean was feeling. Emalie reached him, and Dean handed over one of the bags. He immediately disappeared up the street, but Emalie glanced warily back toward the house.

Oliver leaned into the shadows. When he looked again, she was gone. He
stepped to the side of the window, where he could see the busy intersection at the end of Twilight Lane. Emalie and Dean had reached the corner.

“What happened in there?” Oliver heard Dean ask.

“Nothing,” Emalie said between heavy breaths. “Come on, already.” She grabbed his arm and dragged
him into the street, even though the signal said ‘Don’t Walk.’

“Emalie—” Dean’s whining was lost in the churning of engines and splashing tires.

Lines of cars sped by, spraying water. Emalie’s striped sweater stood out against the wet gray world, like it was the only object that had been colored in. Oliver
watched until they disappeared behind the traffic.

He returned to the area where Emalie had been standing. It took a moment, but he located the earring and fished it out of the crack in the floor. Then he slipped quietly back downstairs, into dry clothes, and into his coffin. He was asleep in moments.
Chapter 2

A Breakfast of Lies

When Oliver’s alarm sounded the next evening, he barely heard it. Rolling over, he slapped it off and shut his eyes.

Seconds later, it seemed, the lid of his coffin was
flying open. “Oliver!” He rolled over to find Phlox looming over him, arms crossed. She was well-dressed as usual, in a fashionable black shirt and pants, her long platinum hair tied back. She wore a burgundy apron, and had a livid scowl on her face.

Oh, no, Oliver thought miserably. She knows about Emalie.
But then Phlox continued, “You’re half an hour late!” She reached down and began yanking him out of bed. Soil, which vampires use like blankets, scattered onto the floor. “You can clean that up later,” Phlox added.

“Come on, Mom!” Oliver’s tone of voice surprised even himself, and his normally brown eyes flared with an amber glow.
He jerked his arm away from her and trudged toward the large ebony armoire. He knew he had no right to be annoyed, he was the one who was late, but still…

“Tssss!” Suddenly, Phlox vaulted through the air, landing in front of him, her pearl white teeth clenched and bared. She hissed and grabbed him by both shoulders, her hazel eyes
glowing turquoise. When she spoke, her voice was low and frigid. “Excuse me?”

Oliver was shocked, not by the force of Phlox’s grip or the anger on her face—those were not unusual for vampires—but by his own attitude. He wanted to snap, *Get off me!* But luckily, he kept that rebellious voice to himself. He didn’t want to make things worse, especially
when he was lucky that Phlox was only mad at him about being late, and not about his misadventures upstairs. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Phlox’s face immediately softened, and the glow faded from her eyes. The next second, she was ruffling Oliver’s hair. “Hurry upstairs. Even your brother is up.” Oliver nodded, and Phlox swept out of the room.
Oliver dressed in his school uniform: pressed black pants, a white button-down shirt, and a tie. He threw on a dark gray sweatshirt and sneakers and hurried up to the kitchen.

The staircase lanterns were now filled with molten magmalight, which swirled with bits of cinder and gave off a warm glow. The kitchen was lit by tiny spotlight
globes on the ceiling that burned hotter, closer to a pure white. The Nocturnes’ entire house was lit by magmalight, which was harnessed from deep within the mantle of the earth. In addition, its pipes ran through the walls and floors, keeping the house heated to a perfect 98.6 degrees.

Oliver sat on a stool at the center island. Bane glanced
up from the other side with exhausted eyes, then hunched back over his breakfast of blood angel cake and coffee. His shaggy black hair hung down in his eyes, a dyed-red shock shooting down the middle. Since Bane was a vampire with a demon, as all high school students were, he no longer had to worry about a dress code. He wore a ratty T-shirt over a white long
underwear top with the cuffs torn off. His jeans, held up only somewhat by a studded belt, were rolled above high black work boots, which were tied with thin chain laces.

“Here you go.” Phlox brought Oliver a plate with a still-sizzling slice of the fried red cake, along with a Coke and a vitamin-size capsule of crushed herbs.

“Thanks.” Oliver dug into
the sugary cake. It was not a normal breakfast in the ancient vampire tradition, but Oliver and his family were New World vampires and embraced a modern way of living.

There were, of course, Old World vampires, like Oliver’s grandparents. They lived in Morosia, one of the many Underworld cities beneath Europe and Asia, and
they disapproved of almost everything about the New World vampires’ way of life. Living so close to the surface, embracing modern technology, going to school and jobs, eating anything other than fresh, preferably still-screaming blood...They thought it was all too human, and they never let Phlox and Sebastian hear the end of it.

Like most adult
arguments, the debate between the New World and the Old World often sounded to Oliver like two sides of the same coin. No vampires wanted to be human. In fact, all vampires, if they had their choice, would have much rather been living in another world altogether, where they could roam free without always worrying about being killed by sunlight or stakes,
but that wasn’t possible. Vampires were trapped here on Earth.

The only part of Phlox and Sebastian’s New World life that the grandparents couldn’t complain about was the very thing that made them grandparents: New World vampires had discovered how to have children. It used to be that there were only adult vampires. Phlox and
Sebastian had been sired. They had been humans in their late teens when they were bitten and turned into vampires. Vampires had always wanted families—love is not just an emotion felt by the living and the good—but human children couldn’t be successfully sired. Their bodies were too fragile and their spirits too pure. Yet while Old World
vampires continued to sire teens, New World alchemists discovered how to create children by combining the DNA of two parents, in a process that used multi-world physics. New World children were grown in a special lab until they were old enough to be “born,” meaning that they were removed from their vessels and brought home by their parents. Even Phlox’s
and Sebastian’s snarly old parents had to admit: They loved their grandchildren.

Having kids forever changed the way of life for New World vampires, because these children were different than their parents in two ways: first, the new children did not have demons. An adult vampire was the combination of a human body and a demon spirit, which
came from one of the other worlds. But just as a human child could not survive being sired, a vampire child’s mind and body were not ready to be inhabited by a demon. Only when vampire children had grown enough, learned enough, and become strong enough could they receive their demons and become adults.

Second, without a demon,
vampire children were not strong enough to drink the blood of humans. While adult vampires could survive on human blood and nothing else, nourished by its potent life forces, New World children needed an entirely different diet. Above all else, they needed sugar to feed their brains. So, a diet high in white flour and processed sugars that could easily be
converted to glucose was ideal. Cakes and confections were now the staple foods at vampire family meals.

Even the adults would indulge in eating them, the difference being that their goblet would be full of human blood, while a child’s goblet would contain blood from one of the less potent creatures, such as pig, wolf, ostrich, or even bear. Each
kind of blood brought with it different aspects of life force and mineral content. Variety was a key to proper growth and development. Kitten blood, for example, was especially high in antibacterial agents, which helped keep away troublesome conditions that the undead had to deal with, like decay and rot.

The breakfast Oliver now
ate, blood angel cake, was very popular: a sweet angel food cake, marinated to a deep crimson color, and then fried.

“Did you sleep any better?” Phlox asked.

Oliver shoved a big bite in his mouth, then nodded. “Mmm.” He felt a wave of relief when Phlox smiled and turned away without asking further questions.
While Oliver and Bane ate, Phlox busied herself with organizing the refrigerator, which stretched along the top of the wall. Its sleek door swung upward to the ceiling with a hiss, revealing racks of hanging blood bags. Phlox kept them meticulously organized by animal and date. Oliver’s grandparents, if they could ever be convinced to visit Seattle, would go into a
demonic rage at seeing these orderly rows of predrained, free-range, organic bloods, and would definitely rant for hours about such an anti-vampyr life.

Sebastian swept into the room, dressed in a fine suit, long black coat trailing behind him. He was tall and broad, more so than Oliver could ever see himself becoming and, when he was
dressed for the office, he embodied all the New World vampire success and refinement. He had been promoted recently to a senior attorney at the Half-Light Consortium, but even before that he had always dressed up, from cuff links to glossy shoes. Sebastian worked so many hours these days, Oliver had trouble picturing him in any other clothing.
He rubbed Oliver’s head as he passed, messing up his dark hair. “Hey, Ollie.”

“Hi,” Oliver responded, but immediately tensed up inside.

“Charles,” Sebastian said as he passed Oliver’s brother.

“It’s Bane, Dad,” Bane muttered, finishing his breakfast.

“Maybe with your friends,” Phlox countered,
“but in this house, we’d prefer to use the name we gave you.”

“Charles,” Bane spat. “It makes me sound like the little lamb over there.” He cast a scowl at Oliver.

Oliver just kept eating. This was the usual with Bane.

“I’d watch yourself, Charles,” Sebastian warned. “And I don’t remember hearing you come in this
morning.”

“So?”

“So”—Phlox’s voice lowered—“the other thing you will do while you live in this house is come home on time.”

Now Bane almost smiled. “Ty and I got hung up in the park. We found a little human out on his own.”

“I see,” Sebastian said. He picked up a heavy lead
pitcher from the counter and filled a nearby goblet, then turned back to Bane. “So,” he continued, sounding reluctantly curious. “How did that go?”

“Oh, man.” Bane’s sulk immediately gave way to excitement as he recounted his vampire activities.

Oliver watched his parents listening intently to the story, their frustration
with Bane forgotten for now. As Bane described his night, Sebastian’s eyes lit with a hint of pride. Bane may have been a late-bloomer—he didn’t receive his demon until well into high school—and that may have made him a bit rebellious (rebellious in vampire terms being roughly equal to extremely dangerous in human terms), but really, as long as he graduated, there
were worse ways a vampire could turn out.

Like you, little lamb, Oliver thought, hearing Bane’s mocking tone in his head. He wondered if he would ever please his parents like Bane did. It didn’t seem possible.

Bane finished his story and left the table. Oliver took his last bite of cake. When he looked up, he found Sebastian
staring at him oddly.

“Nothing,” Oliver said guiltily, even though his dad hadn’t asked him anything.

“You look tired,” Sebastian said with a sigh. “We should talk. I’ve been so busy at work…”

“Dad, I’m fine,” Oliver lied.

“You don’t look fine. Mom says you’re having trouble sleeping.” Sebastian
raised an eyebrow hopefully. “Is it the dreams?”

“I guess,” Oliver lied again. His dad was referring to the dreams that a young vampire had when his demon was coming. A vampire first met his demon in dreams, getting to know the demon’s long history, as the demon slowly added his memory and experiences to the vampire’s brain. The process was called
cohesion. The dreams sometimes came for years before the demon arrived, and they were supposed to be cool; a demon’s life was full of violent history. Oliver would have gladly been asleep and having those dreams, rather than lying awake each night like he had been. Still, it seemed easier just to lie to Dad.

“Well,” Sebastian said,
“your yearly doctor’s checkup is in a couple days. That always makes you feel better. And the dreams are exciting, aren’t they?”

Now Oliver noticed Phlox gazing at him, her eyes wet with tears. Oliver found himself cementing the lie: “Yeah, really exciting.”

“My baby’s growing up...” Phlox smiled. “And so fast.” She moved over to
Sebastian and put an arm around his waist. “This is much sooner than Charles.”

“Mmm,” Sebastian agreed. “Sounds fine to me.”

Phlox sighed. “Oliver, this is a big deal.”

Oliver thought he might explode. How had this happened? Here he was, now with a secret about a human and a lie about his demon!

Sebastian leaned over and
kissed Phlox. “I have to run.”

“Don’t forget,” Phlox called after him, “I have a committee meeting tonight down at the Central Council.”

Sebastian nodded, but his brow furrowed. “I’ll try not to be too late.” He disappeared back down the stairs, heading for their main door, which led into the sewers.

Oliver started to turn away from the table. “Don’t
forget to take your vitamins,” Phlox said as she resumed her organizing. “It’s especially important now that you’re having the demon dreams.”

“Right.” Oliver nodded, but inside he scowled. The capsule, full of a crushed blend of dark herbs, tasted terrible as usual. It was a combination of trollex root for blood absorption, leaf of blood fig to improve
problem-solving skills, and nightshade stems for skin clarity. Oliver knew that Bane always faked taking them. He considered doing the same, but sighed and swallowed it for real.

The pill was halfway down his throat when Bane slapped him violently on the back of the head. “Come on, lamb,” Bane said sarcastically. “Don’t want to
be late for another great night at school!”

“Charles…” Phlox warned again, but Bane was already out of the room.

Oliver gagged for a moment, then got the herbs down and sullenly followed his brother.
Chapter 3

A Surprise at School

DURING THE LONG, PLEASANT nights of winter, Oliver and Bane could safely use the surface streets to get around rather than the sewers and tunnels. They walked down Twilight Lane, then among
the streets of human homes. Christmas lights twinkled on houses and in trees. A dreary mist fell on them as they walked. Though vampires didn’t mind rain, the brothers wore long black coats at Phlox’s insistence, to keep their school clothes dry, and also because, though rare, vampires could develop problems with mold if they weren’t careful.
Oliver had a heavy backpack slung over his shoulders. He had to lean forward against the weight of the parchment texts inside. Bane had nothing with him.

At the high school, where Bane and his classmates all had demons, classes were given using only spoken word. Bane used books now and then, for reference, but because demons had nearly
timeless memories, and because vampires with demons would never bother with something as tedious as homework, Bane never had to bring a book to or from school. Of course, even if Bane had been required to, he likely wouldn’t. School wasn’t his first priority.

They passed under the looming girders of a high freeway bridge. Deep in the
shadowy crux where the bridge met the rising slope of land, the humans had thoughtfully built a giant stone statue of a troll. From behind its massive head, two sets of eyes lit up in the murk, one yellow, one orange.

An older boy spoke in a mocking girl’s voice, “Oh, look at me, on my way to school like a good little rat-sucker should!”
Bane turned toward the eyes. “Shut up, Ty,” he said, but smiled devilishly. Then he patted Oliver on the shoulder. “Have a good day at school, bro,” he said, and hiked around behind the troll’s head. He disappeared in the dark and, a moment later, his eyes lit up as he joined the others. Oliver heard hands slapping.

“Hey!” Bane shouted in
Oliver’s direction. “Run along, lamb!” Oliver turned toward school, his anxious feelings returning as he did so. It was hard to imagine that he would ever be like Bane and his friends: having a demon and acting like a grown-up vampire. At least, it wasn’t expected of him now. But soon, now that everyone thinks I’m having the dreams, he thought gloomily as he
North Seattle Middle School was a looming brick building surrounded by large, bare-limbed trees and streets of small houses. It was old by human standards, built in the early 1900s. The paint around the windows was chipped. There were chunks of brick missing here and there. Human boys and girls still went there during the day,
while the vampires secretly used it at night. Oliver wondered if the human kids thought it was a dump, but Oliver liked it. There were nicer private academies a vampire could go to. Oliver probably had the grades, and Phlox and Sebastian had made it clear that they would support Oliver if he wanted to apply to one, but Oliver never had. It was bad enough
feeling like he didn’t fit in here, where the pressure was low. He couldn’t imagine being under the scrutiny at an academy, not to mention being around those ultra-motivated kids.

He reached the back door, beside the blacktop basketball courts and knocked. The door swung open, and there was Rodrigo, the night janitor. “Mr. Nocturne,” he said in his
soft voice, “Welcome, sir.” Oliver nodded, wondering once again how the humans never noticed the points of Rodrigo’s teeth, or that he wasn’t breathing hard when he scrubbed the bathrooms—that he, in fact, wasn’t breathing at all. Those who starred in human movies or worked for human news stations had to work a bit harder to keep their identities
secret, but a vampire could work just about any night job in the city and be pretty sure that no human would notice what they really were.

Oliver headed up the wide stairs. The halls glowed in wild, shimmering neon. The painted murals and bulletin boards on the walls of the human school had been obscured by spectacular three-dimensional vampire
graffiti art, called grotesqua. It was done in luminescent spray paint, a variety invisible during daylight, that Rodrigo activated each evening. There were demon faces, creatures from history and lore, and battle scenes that moved with neon figures fighting in silent motion. In some places, the glowing art resembled ancient hieroglyphics and runes. This was done by the older
students, those who had begun to learn Skrit, the ancient pictorial language of the vampyr.

Oliver reached his classroom. The overhead lights were off, but a candle was lit on each desk, along with two on the empty lectern at the front. About half of his class of twenty had already arrived. A few boys were up on the walls, spray-painting
glowing graffiti of their own with tiny silver cans. The girls were standing around the human children’s fish tank, as their ringleader, Suzyn, carefully chose one of the tropical fish to eat. Oliver headed for his desk over by the windows.

As he passed under the back wall, he heard one of the boys above, Theo Moore, chanting ominously,
“Here comes the human, leaving school too late...”

Another boy, Brent, joined in, “Go tell his mother, he’s already been ate!”

Theo lunged, landing on Oliver and slamming him to the floor.

“Ow, knock it off!” Oliver shouted, shoving Theo off him and jumping to his feet.

“Sorry.” Theo frowned as
he leaped back up onto the wall. “Guess the little lamb doesn’t like to play the vampire games.”

“Shut up,” Oliver said, but too softly for the boys to hear. Theo had already turned his attention to the next student entering, and he and his friends resumed their chant.

Oliver reached the far row of desks by the tall windows
and slumped into his seat. “Hey, Seth,” he said to the boy beside him.

Seth was short and round-faced, with curly blond hair. He was laying a set of role-playing cards out in front of him. “Hey,” he said absently, then laid a card, and frowned. “Osiris’s army of light is totally kicking my butt.”

“Too bad,” Oliver said. He and Seth were considered
friends, in so much as they sat next to each other and rarely hung out with Theo and his group. Seth’s mother, Francyne, was on a few community councils with Phlox, and Oliver and Seth often ended up at the same adult events. Though they were good at hanging out and being bored together, Oliver felt like he and Seth were stuck with each other more
than anything else, and Oliver never really knew what to say to him. Then again, he never knew what to say to most people.

Behind them, there was a flat smack as Theo landed on another student, and the others on the wall cackled. Oliver couldn’t resist glancing back. One of his class’s smallest students, Berthold Welch, was
squirming his way free of Theo’s grip, righting his glasses.

Oliver turned back to Seth. “Looking forward to Longest Night?” he asked, trying again to make conversation. Longest Night was the vampire celebration of the winter solstice.

“I guess,” said Seth, raising his eyebrows. “Mom and Dad say I need to get my
grades up if I want a bunny.” He licked his teeth as he said it, and glanced over at Oliver. “Hey, you don’t look so good.”

“Oh—I’m just tired. I um…” Oliver scrambled to think of some acceptable excuse for why he looked so exhausted and landed on the familiar one before he could stop himself. “I started having the dreams, I think.”
Seth looked impressed. “No way, really? Wow, I think you’re the first. I haven’t heard anyone else say that.” He glanced around class. “You should tell Mr. VanWick, he’ll probably give you less homework, and have you tell your dreams to the class. Man, Oliver, you’re lucky.”

Yeah right, Oliver thought, cursing himself.
Why had he started the lie again? “I… I’m not ready to tell anyone, yet,” he said quickly. “Actually, they’ve been making me a little sick…”

Seth’s eyes widened even further. “Wow, ’cause they’re so intense? Maybe you’re going to get your demon soon!”

It was official: Everything Oliver said just made things
worse. “Oh, I don’t know about that. My dad said it could still be a while. It might just be acclimation sickness or something.” Acclimation sickness was almost like an allergy—when a child felt ill and out of sorts as their energies first joined with their demon. It was common and almost always passed before the demon actually arrived.

“Oh, yeah, could be,”
Seth said, but he was still impressed. “Man, if you get your demon first…” He gave a mischievous glance toward Theo and his gang on the back wall.

“Mmm.” Oliver nodded. “Right now I just want to feel better. I’ve got my checkup on Friday though, so that should help.”

Seth had started flipping over his cards again. “Your
what?”

“You know,” Oliver said. “Doctor’s visit. Just the same old yearly checkup stuff.”

Seth gave him a strange look. “You go to the doctor every year?”

“Yeah,” Oliver replied. “Don’t you?”

“I can’t even remember the last time I went to a doctor,” Seth said. “What would you need to go every
“You know, I mean, make sure you’re healthy…” Oliver trailed off. His thoughts raced. *Because there’s something wrong with me, obviously*, he thought.

“Healthy?” Seth said the word like it was from another language. “Your mom must be—ow!” There was a smacking sound and Seth grabbed the back of his head.
“What the—”

Oliver heard a whoosh of air, and he and Seth turned to find Theo landing right behind their seats, flanked on either side by Brent and their friend Maggots. Maggots’s real name was Rollie, but the nickname came from a case of the worms that he’d had since kindergarten and never fully gotten over, which often left him scratching at his head.
and feet.

“What, Seth?” Theo asked, smiling.

Seth reached to the floor and picked up the object that had hit him: a rolled-up ball of paper. He threw it back at Theo. “Knock it off!”

Theo was quick. He grabbed the paper in mid-flight, then smacked Seth across the head with it. “Careful!”

“The cow-lover speaks!” Theo said, his eyes flashing at Oliver.

“Moo,” Maggots added.

“What are you talking about?” Oliver asked. Theo was always looking for a reason to harass someone. His father, Grady, was a fairly notorious businessman in town, and kids at school
knew that he was also fairly notorious when it came to punishing Theo. Which only made it harder to deal with Theo when he was being a jerk. “You’re so stupid,” said Oliver.

Theo slapped the papers down flat on the desk in front of him.

“Check it out,” Theo hissed in Oliver’s ear. “You’re front-page material.”
In front of Oliver was the Sea Lion Ledger, the human kids’ school newspaper. It had today’s date on it. There were a bunch of articles laid out on the front page, but it only took Oliver a moment to see what Theo was talking about and, when he did, Oliver felt a sickening wave of worry. There, in the bottom left corner of the page, was a color
In Search of the Vampires
—Part 1

*A Photo Essay by Emalie Watkins*

We all know the rumors, but what is the
truth? Are there really vampires among us? In this exclusive story, we will search for evidence of the undead.

(Continued on page 7)

“Come on, turn the page,” Theo snapped, whipping the paper open.

Oliver watched, feeling like he might as well turn to dust. His thoughts were
swirling. When he saw a four-photo spread of his house—the overturned dresser, the broken refrigerator, the peeling wallpaper, the putrid bathtub—Oliver actually felt a moment of relief until he read the short article running beside the pictures:

This house at 16 Twilight Lane looks
abandoned. But is it? Coming in next week’s issue, my shocking photo of a real vampire who lives there.

“I—” Oliver began hoarsely. Theo cut him off. “Dude, this girl has been in your house. She knows about the vampires. Is your family a bunch of human-lovers, or what?”
“No, we—I didn’t know she knew we were vampires—” Oliver froze, realizing what he’d just said.

And so did Theo. “Wait, you knew this girl was in your house?”

“Well, I—”

“And you let her get away?! Ha! If that was me, I would’ve been like—” Theo bared his teeth and lashed his head forward. “Bang! Nosy
human, dead human!” He shared a chuckle with Brent and Maggots. “But not you, Oliver. Figures. Couldn’t do it, could you?”

“Um—” Oliver had no idea what to say. He looked frantically around the room, as if there was anywhere else to go. The entire class had turned toward the conversation. Seth was slouching as low as he could
in his chair.
And Theo kept making it worse. “You know what I think,” he said, “I think you like this human.”
Snickers echoed around the room.
“No, I don’t,” Oliver muttered uselessly.
“Whatever,” Theo went on. “If this girl has pictures of vampires, then I think she needs to get bit.”
“We should find her,” Brent added.

“She knows too much,” Theo finished.

“Yum,” Maggots agreed, scratching at his hair.

Oliver knew that none of them had ever bitten a human. Theo claimed to have tasted human blood, but Oliver thought it was all talk. Still...

“Hey, Oliver,” Theo went
on, rubbing Oliver’s head. “We can save a bite for you since you like her so much —”

“Shut up!” Oliver shouted, and leaped to his feet. He grabbed the surprised Theo by the tie and slammed him backward. The two launched into the air, hitting the back wall five feet off the ground and cracking the chalkboard.
“No way!” Theo shouted hoarsely, Oliver’s forearm against his neck. “Are you defending the human?”

Brent and Maggots were up on the wall in a moment. They wrenched Oliver free and hurled him across the classroom. Oliver lost his sense of up and down. He reached out to the forces without success and braced for a hard landing—
Only suddenly, he was stilled in midair, his body being controlled by someone else. Oliver opened his eyes to find himself suspended upside down just over the fish tank. Now his body flipped around, and he was thrust across the room toward his desk. As he flew, he heard the excited murmuring of students. He also saw Theo being pulled off the wall by
an invisible force.

“Settle down, gentlemen,” a low, gravelly voice hissed.

Oliver tumbled into his chair, then looked up to see Theo being dropped into his seat with a bone-jarring crunch.

Their teacher, Mr. VanWick, was sweeping into the room, coattails trailing behind him. “Students,” he muttered, “that’s enough
horseplay.” The boys and girls quickly scurried to their seats. Mr. VanWick reached the front of the room and tossed his leather briefcase onto the lectern. As he approached, a goblet, whose rim looked like it had never been washed, met his hand in the air. He took a sip, then looked out at the class and smiled. His flair for the dramatic dated back to having
been an Underworld star of the stage in the 1700s. He had even appeared in early human silent films. Aside from the long hair growing from his ears, he kept his appearance youthful, despite his four hundred or more years. Only his eyes, deep in dark circles and red-rimmed, showed his true age.

Mr. VanWick continued, “Books to page one-eight-
five.” Everyone dutifully flipped open their parchment textbooks as Mr. VanWick cleared his throat and began to lecture in his low steady voice.

Oliver managed to get his book open, his body still aching and his mind racing. He couldn’t believe that article. Emalie had known about vampires…. If she printed that picture of him,
Oliver’s school and home life would officially be over. He would never, ever hear the end of it.

And Emalie’s life would likely be over as well. A human writing articles about the vampires, no matter what little paper it was in, was also writing her own death sentence.
Chapter 4
A Missed Chance

OLIVER SAT QUIETLY AT dinner that morning, lost in thought. He absolutely could not let that photo appear in the paper. And he couldn’t let Theo get to Emalie first.
Oliver didn’t think that Theo and his friends would kill her, but if Theo got his hands on the photo she had taken, he could find many ways to torment Oliver with it. So Oliver had to get to Emalie before them, and definitely before any adult vampires noticed that article and started asking the Nocturnes why their house was featured in a human school paper. Because
that might lead his parents all the way back to Oliver knowing about Emalie’s visits in the first place.

He could imagine his parents’ ashamed voices. *Why didn’t you tell us? Or at least stop her from leaving that very first morning?* Yet the truth was that it hadn’t even occurred to him to do so. And it would only be more embarrassing to explain that.
“How was school, dear?” Oliver started, looking up like he’d been caught in a beam of sunlight, but Phlox was talking to Bane. The three of them were sitting in the low-lit dining room. Its walls were hung with deep velvet curtains, the magmalights cooled to orange. A place was laid out for Sebastian, who wasn’t yet home.
“Mmm.” Bane’s mouth was full of the chocolate soufflé they were dining on. “What a night,” he added between chews. Oliver marveled at how easily Bane talked around the truth.

“Did you make any progress with physics class?” Phlox asked him.

Bane slugged back a gulp from his goblet. “Physics is stupid.”
Phlox smiled tightly and looked down at her plate. Oliver knew that look: the calm before the storm. It would be that look and more if his parents found out about this business with Emalie. “Physics is the key to learning to control the forces,” Phlox said sweetly. She took a slow sip from her goblet.

“Whatever—” Bane
began.

“IT—is—not—what—ever,” Phlox hissed. Her eyes began to glow turquoise.

“You’re barely keeping up with your studies as it is, Charles. You’re almost eighteen. Do you want to be the only one in your class who still can’t occupy?”

Occupying animals was a higher level vampire skill. It allowed vampires to merge
spirits with certain dark animals, using them to travel, spy, or enter places unnoticed.

“Occupying is stupid, too,” Bane snapped.

“Really?” Phlox replied, her eyes starting to smolder.

Something caught Oliver’s eye from the corner of the room. There was a narrow shelf along the wall, with fire bonsai growing
downward out of it, twisting their way in gnarled spirals toward an ornate iron bowl on the floor that was filled with swirling red magmalight. Beside this display, a large brown rat was squeezing out from a crack in the stone wall. Its eyes were unnaturally black.

“Why do I need to travel in some lowly, living animal?” Bane was going on.
The rat crept up behind Bane’s chair, then paused to stand on its hind legs. Wisps of black smoke began to rise from it. The feathers of smoke grew, twirling together, gaining weight and shape, and in moments, there was Sebastian. The rat drooped to the ground, looking exhausted, and slinked back into the wall.

“It’s a waste of time,”
Bane continued.

Sebastian stood just behind Bane, smoothing his suit jacket, pulling at his cuffs, even winking at Oliver. Then in a lightning stroke, he closed both hands around Bane’s neck. Bane’s eyes bugged. His goblet sailed out of his hand, clattering on the stone floor.

“Hmm,” Sebastian said into Bane’s ear. “I think
occupying comes in rather handy, myself.” He let go and moved to his chair, kissing Phlox before sitting down.

“How was work, dear?” asked Phlox, her eyes cooling back to hazel.

“The long nights never end,” Sebastian said tiredly.

Bane rubbed at his neck, scowling. Oliver looked down at his plate, hoping Phlox might return to Bane.
“And how was your night, Oliver?” she asked.

“Oh—it was fine,” Oliver replied as dully as he could.

“Remember, you have your checkup on Friday,” said Sebastian as he scooped soufflé onto his plate.

“Oh, yeah.” Oliver nodded.

“I don’t get why the lamb has to go to these annual doctor’s checkups,” Bane
muttered.

Oliver kept his head down, but listened carefully. He hadn’t wanted to start any conversations, given the number of secrets he was currently dealing with, not even about Seth’s strange doctor comments. Luckily, Bane had done it for him.

“Well, Charles,” Phlox began. “There’s been new research on what growing
children need—"

“What he needs is some guts,” Bane muttered sarcastically.

“Careful,” Phlox countered.

Oliver dared to glance up—and found Sebastian looking at him. It was that odd look again, like Oliver was something to be studied. But then Sebastian smiled and turned away.
“Doctors, nutrition,” Bane scoffed. “Why can’t we live like Old World vampires? If we lived in Morosia, I’d be getting to raid human towns by now.”

“That’s enough,” Sebastian said sternly. His eyes, normally brown like Oliver’s, glowed fiercely, passing amber and nearing crimson. “There’ll be no more talk of the Old World
here. You can get your fill with your cousins next time we visit your grandparents, but until then, you will continue to try to become an enlightened being, and a part of the future, not the past.” This was a topic that could anger him like no other. Even Bane sensed it and stopped.

Forks clinked against stone plates.

“I heard at Central
Council today,” Phlox finally said brightly, “that they’re thinking of adopting a new policy on coagulants.”

“Mmm,” Sebastian chimed in. “The trade in blood concentrates has been out of hand for some time. Three dealers were incinerated for it last week alone.”

And just like that, conversation moved on.
Oliver only half-listened. His mind kept coming back to either the doctor or Emalie, and both had him worried.

Oliver had an easy time waking up the next evening, mainly because once again, he’d barely slept. He was up long before his alarm, tossing and turning in the late afternoon. When four o’clock finally arrived and the winter
sun set, Oliver got up and set yet another lie into motion.

Bane was still fast asleep. Phlox was bustling upstairs. Sebastian had left early for work. Oliver hurried up to the kitchen.

Phlox was organizing dishes. The TV mounted to the wall was on and turned to a weather channel, where meteorologist Ken Tempest was reporting from a
hurricane. His trench coat flapped in howling winds, yet his hair remained perfect. “The entire southern coast is absolutely in tatters,” he said seriously, yet with a trace of a smirk. “So far five deaths have been attributed to this storm.” Behind him, rain flew sideways, and palm trees bent almost to the ground. The report cut to a house being torn apart. Oliver watched
with interest. Ken was a household favorite, since, unbeknownst to his human television employers, he was actually vampire. He always got the most exciting scoop on the biggest storms, and vampires always enjoyed a good human tragedy.

“Hi, Mom,” said Oliver.

“Hey, you’re up early.” Concern filled Phlox’s voice.

“Trouble sleeping?”
“Nah,” Oliver lied, leaning on the center island but not sitting down.

“Oh.” Phlox seemed to relax. “The dreams then, huh?” She smiled. “Have you learned his name yet?”

“Who?”

“Your demon.” Phlox sounded as excited as his gossipy classmates sometimes got. “Do you know where he’s from?”
“I—”

“Oh, never mind. It’s probably too soon,” said Phlox. “I’m sure the settings and images are still confusing.”

“Yeah,” said Oliver, trying to sound disappointed.

“Well, in time—”

“I have that study group before school,” Oliver blurted before Phlox said any more. “I told you.” He kept his eyes
off her, picking a spot on the low cabinets and staring at it. “What study group?” “For Multi-world Math.” Oliver knew Phlox rarely forgot one of his activities. This was risky, for sure. “And you told me when?” asked Phlox skeptically. “Yesterday,” Oliver said quickly. “I mean, I thought I did. I was supposed to...I don’t want to go.”
“Well…of course you should.” Phlox nodded firmly. “You need to take every opportunity to keep your grades up. Um…” She opened the fridge and reached for a blood bag. “Okay then, I can whip up something quick for breakfast, I guess.”

“Mom, I…I’m supposed to be there soon.” Oliver couldn’t stand the idea of sitting in the kitchen, eating
beneath the weight of his lies. “All right, here”—she rummaged into the cabinet and produced his herb pill—“take this, and this, while you walk.” She reached into the fridge for a large jar that held tarantulas in suspension. The spiders were flash-fried to keep their fluids and venom in, then dipped in chocolate. Tarantula venom helped with quick healing,
which was important, because recess play could get rough.

Oliver took the spider and hurried from the kitchen. Since it was still faintly light outside, he headed back downstairs and exited through a heavy wooden door by the crypt. He entered a short earthen tunnel that led to a second metal door. It slid open, and Oliver entered the main sewer line beneath
Twilight Lane.

The sewer tunnels had all been built by humans. New World vampires believed that, whenever possible, there was no reason to expend the effort to build something, if there were these industrious humans around to do it for them. The same vampires at city hall who kept the houses on Twilight Lane safe from demolition also made sure
that the major vampire tunnels were only worked on by night crews of city workers, and that these night crews were strictly undead.

Oliver walked along the edge of a wide tunnel composed of thick stone blocks. A shallow channel of rainwater ran down the center of the floor. Ornate lanterns glowed with mellow, golden magmalight. Recesses had
been chiseled at regular intervals into the crux of the wall and floor. Each held a wrought iron candelabra, ablaze with thirteen tallow candles. The light from these cast twisted, larger-than-life shadows of the passersby up onto the walls and ceiling. Vampires loved this kind of simple distortion of reality into something artful.

This tunnel was a fairly
major thoroughfare. And so, between the sconces, the dank walls were adorned with perfectly preserved ancient art work: portraits of vampires that spanned millennia and majestic depictions of epic human battles. Oliver passed a twenty-foot-long embroidered tapestry showing a legendary vampire, Klaus Virhaeten, whispering conspiratorially
into the ear of the famous, and easily influenced, human general Alexander the Great. Alexander sat on a throne, in the shade of palm leaves, watching over a spectacular battle that flowed chaotically across the rest of the tapestry, displaying the grisly carnage of tens of thousands of men as no human artist would ever had dared to show it. There was no artful “glory” or
“heroics” in this depiction of war, just chaos and terror—humans at their most entertaining.

The sewer was fairly empty this early in the evening. A slow-walking old vampire woman was plodding along ahead of Oliver. A finely suited businessman huffed and flipped to the ceiling in order to pass her without having to put his
brilliantly polished shoes in the water.

Oliver walked up another block, then stopped beneath a manhole cover high in the ceiling. He pressed a button on the wall, and the manhole slid open. Oliver leaped upward, shooting out of the sewer and landing in a narrow alley between two streets of quiet houses, only a block from school. It was almost
dark now and rain fell from a featureless ash-gray sky. The colors in the alley were draining away with the darkness.

The last humans were still lingering outside of school: two kids shooting a basketball, a trio of girls sitting on the steps waiting for a ride home. As Oliver passed by, a silence fell over them. He headed quickly
around back. Some classrooms were still lit, making skewed rectangles on the wet blacktop. Oliver reached the back door and knocked softly. There was a moment of silence, then the door opened and Rodrigo looked out, speaking in his ever-tired voice, “You’re a bit early, sir.”

“Sorry, Rodrigo,” Oliver said. “I…I need to do some
extra work—can I come in?”

Rodrigo backed out of the way. “Just be careful,” he warned. “There are still humans around.”

“Got it,” said Oliver. He headed downstairs, staying close to the wall, ready to spectralize. He’d seen signs for the humans’ school newspaper in the basement art room and figured that was where Emalie and the other
The only light came from the art room door, at the far end of the hall. Oliver stayed against the wall. As he neared the door, a tall, skinny girl popped out of a restroom, not two feet from him. She was three steps across the hall when she froze, glancing nervously over her shoulder. Oliver leaned back against the wall and spectralized,
becoming only a shadow against the colorfully painted mural behind him. The girl gazed through him, but still darted quickly back into the art room.

Oliver moved to the doorway and scaled the wall. From the ceiling, he hung down and peered inside. The lights on the left side of the room were on. There were four students: two girls sitting
at computers, one boy sitting at a high bench table—and, off in a dark corner, Emalie. She was holding her old camera under a bright lamp. She had the back open and was fiddling around with it. Her hair was in two braids. She wore her same lime green vest, an olive army jacket beneath it.

Oliver slipped through the door and up onto the
classroom ceiling. He headed for the nearby corner and crouched, making himself as small as he could.

The two girls at the computers were giggling. They were chatting online. The boy was reading over some printed pages and editing.

“All right, everybody,” said an older woman’s voice. Their teacher’s wide frame
appeared in the doorway. “It’s time to head home. Make sure you get your articles finished tonight.”

The boy spun and immediately left. The two girls got up and started putting on jackets and hats. Emalie continued to study her camera.

“Ms. Davis said it’s time to go, Emalie,” one of the girls said in an unfriendly
Emalie didn’t answer. The girl huffed, then rolled her eyes to her friend.

“She’s so annoying,” the other girl murmured, then turned back to Emalie. “Be careful you don’t run into a vampire down here alone.” The girls laughed as they left. For a moment, Oliver could hear them going on to each other in the hall, “What’s her
deal? Is she homeless again, or something?”

“Who knows? And what’s with that ancient camera? It’s like, afford a digital…” Their voices faded away.

Emalie muttered softly in a mocking tone, “Afford a digital.” She shook her head.

Oliver stayed in the corner until their sounds and scents had faded. Then he crept a few feet closer,
stopping as he reached a display of cut-out snowflakes hanging from the ceiling.

Emalie was still fiddling with her camera. “What’s with you?” she muttered at it.

Oliver studied the snowflakes, thinking they were a bit simplistic-looking to be displayed in public. If he had set about making a paper snowflake, it would have been so much more
ornate and detailed—then again, he’d had a few decades more practice with scissors and paper. What are you doing? he suddenly shouted at himself. Why was he thinking about snowflakes when he needed to talk to Emalie? But how to start? Would he try to scare her, or reason with her? Would he tell her that he was a vampire? And how would she...
react? Maybe, since she was trying to prove that vampires existed, she’d be excited. Or maybe she’d be terrified and take off, and what would he do then?

“Oh, Emalie—” Ms. Davis had returned to lock the door. “Didn’t know you were still here. You really need to get going.”

“Sorry,” said Emalie. She stuffed her camera into her
beat-up canvas backpack and slid off the stool. As she walked out, Ms. Davis gave her a perplexed glance before reaching in and flicking off the lights.

Oliver dropped to the floor and kicked the nearest stool. A perfectly good opportunity and he’d blown it. *You’re a lamb, just like Bane says!* he yelled at himself. Then he looked to
the classroom clock: not even five thirty. He still had a while before school started.

Oliver headed back down the hall. He left out the back door and circled around the school. There was Emalie, walking up the street, alone. Oliver followed her, staying just over a streetlight-length behind her. She headed up the block, then turned and started across the ball fields.
Oliver couldn’t believe this girl was still alive with all the dangerous things she did. Crossing these fields alone in the dark? This was probably too dark a place to try introducing himself. He needed somewhere better lit. Oliver darted along behind her, moving from an old tree to the swings, to the basketball hoop, making sure there was some cover for him
to blend into if she turned around, but she didn’t.

Emalie passed through a border of trees, leaving the park, and stopped at the next street corner. She stood in a cone of light, mist falling on her, looking up and down the street, almost like she was deciding which way to go. Now she started fiddling in her bag. Oliver reached the edge of the fields. This corner
would be a good spot, well enough lit that she might give him a chance. He started up the sidewalk—

A city bus pulled up. Emalie had drawn a bus pass from her pocket. The doors swung open and she stepped on board. Oliver was frozen. What now? Maybe he should just turn around, give up. But instead, as the bus pulled away, Oliver broke into a run.
He leaped into the air and soared upward. Pushing against the *forces* as hard as he knew how, he reached the top of the streetlights at the height of his jump, then arced downward, landing on top of the bus—

Only his jump wasn’t perfect, and he immediately slid off the roof. Looking down, he saw the blur of pavement rushing up toward
him. He grabbed at the side of the bus, tightening his grip on the forces, and just managed to hang on. He threw his body against the side, exhausted, and immediately spectralized as best he could, because many heads were peering out the windows just above him, wondering what all the racket had been.

The bus traveled a mile before Emalie got off. Oliver
dropped from the side and sat down on the bus stop bench to rest, letting her go ahead of him. His muscles burned, and his mind ached from concentrating. Finally, he got up and followed Emalie’s scent up a side street to a tiny, one-story house.

Unlike its neighbors, Emalie’s lawn didn’t have any plastic, light-up Christmas figurines. There
were no cheery lights strung on the trees or along the gutters, either. Oliver started up the walk, noting the overgrown yard on either side. Except for the light from the windows, this place almost resembled a vampire house.

He climbed carefully onto the porch, staying away from the rectangles of light. Inside, he saw a living room crowded
with half-unpacked boxes. A tiny, artificial Christmas tree stood atop one stack. Its lights weren’t plugged in. There was a crooked floor lamp by a table piled with dishes and papers. A man sat there, scratching his head and looking over a stack of bills. “Hey!” he shouted suddenly. There was no reply from the rest of the house. “I thought your friend said that the hot
water was included in the rent!” Again, no one answered. The man drank from a beer bottle beside him, then shook his head. He had dark bags under his eyes. “Margie!” he shouted now. “Stop ignoring me!”

A light flicked on in the corner of Oliver’s vision. Looking around the edge of the porch, he saw that it was coming from the basement,
casting a small rectangle against the neighboring house. The light flicked off, replaced by a faint red glow. Oliver vaulted the railing and crouched to peer through the window.

Emalie stood in a small, square space, its walls made of boxes. She was leaning over a sink, and was lit only in red and shadow. Distantly, Oliver heard the man upstairs
shout, “Come on, Margie!” to no reply. Emalie glanced up at the ceiling, frowning, then pulled earphones out of her vest pocket and slipped them on.

She bent back to the sink, where she picked up a pair of tongs and began shaking a piece of paper that was lying in a shallow tray of liquid. Oliver noticed a string along the wall with many photos
hanging by clothespins. Oliver hadn’t ever seen a darkroom before, but he understood basically what was happening. He watched through the window, with Emalie, as the paper she was shaking began to darken, and an image took shape. There was a wall, and something intricate and made of glass—a chandelier.

Now Oliver recognized
the ceiling from the first floor of his house.

She was developing the photo of him.

He stood up, about to look for a way inside—

When something sharp nudged him in the back, directly behind his heart.

“Don’t move, demon,” said a low voice.
Chapter 5

The Photograph

OLIVER FROZE. HE COULD already smell that the object was wood. And yet, he could also hear his enemy’s short, quick breaths, and could smell that he was desperately scared. With his keen vampire memory of scents, it
only took Oliver a moment to figure out who this was.

In a lightning motion, he leaped straight up into the air, flipped overhead, and landed behind his assailant. He grabbed his arm and twisted it around his back.

“Ahh!”

The broken length of tree branch fell to the ground. Oliver pushed his attacker forward, pinning him against
the foundation of the house.  

“No!” Dean gasped, looking up at Oliver, wide-eyed. “I didn’t mean it, I—”

Oliver bared his teeth. He wasn’t actually sure what he was going to do next, but he definitely planned on terrifying Dean.

“Please don’t kill me!”

“Stop it!” Emalie raced around the side of the house. She had her own wooden
weapon. It looked like the handle of a hammer, and it had been whittled to a sharp point. “Get away from him!”

Oliver let go and stood up. He thought about leaping up to the rooftop and taking off, but Emalie flicked a flashlight beam squarely on him. He winced and shielded his eyes.

Dean stayed slumped on the ground. He coughed
weakly, pulling at the collar of his wool sweater.

“Dean!” Emalie cried, but she didn’t go to him. She stayed a few steps away, flashlight and stake pointed at Oliver. She glanced back at Dean, her brow furrowing angrily. “What were you thinking?”

Dean gathered his long arms and legs together and warily got to his feet, fixing
his sweater and rubbing his short, black hair back into place. “I...I was just coming over for homework. I brought the Chinese.” He gazed dejectedly at the grass, where a bag of Chinese food boxes lay spilled. “But then I saw him. I...I just thought I could __”

“Well, you can’t,” Emalie scolded. Her eyes turned to Oliver. “You’re no match for
a vampire.”

Oliver tried to think of what to say. She knew what he was. It probably shouldn’t have surprised him.

“You’re the one from the house,” Emalie continued, catching Oliver even more off guard.

“Yeah,” was all he could manage to say.

She looked at him oddly, and what she said next
surprised him. “Come inside.”

“Emalie!” Dean blurted, but Emalie flashed him a stern look, turned and started around the house. “This is crazy,” muttered Dean. He almost took a step, then stopped, instead motioning to Oliver. “You first.”

Oliver shrugged and walked around the house, listening carefully to see if
Dean tried to pick up his weapon. He didn’t bother, instead gathering the Chinese food before catching up. “Emalie! Are you sure about this?” Dean called after her. Emalie didn’t answer. “She’s out of her mind,” Dean groaned quietly.

Oliver followed Emalie through a narrow door into the basement, weaving between piles of boxes to the
cramped darkroom space, lit only in red. She returned to the sink as if Oliver wasn’t there. Dean squeezed by, keeping a wary eye on Oliver, and put the food on a rusty washing machine along the wall.

“What’s your name?” Emalie asked, bent over the sink.

“I’m Oliver.”

“Oliver?” Dean mumbled.
“That’s not a very demonlike name—” Oliver glanced at him. He didn’t even try to make a menacing face, but Dean immediately went pale. “Sorry,” he said quickly. “It’s a fine name.”

“I’m not exactly a demon,” Oliver started. “I—” But then he stopped. He didn’t need to explain himself! He just needed to tell Emalie what he’d been
meaning to all evening. “Look, Emalie, you’re in danger.”

Emalie didn’t even seem surprised that he knew her name. “Why?” She started running water from the tap.

“The vampires know about your article.”

“See?” Dean said accusingly. “I told you!”

This made Emalie stop. “How do they—how do you
know about it?”

“Well…” Oliver explained as briefly as he could: how he attended the very same school at night, how his classmates had seen her story, and how they’d reacted. He left out the torment he’d taken for the mere possibility that he knew her. “If this gets out to the rest of town—”

“Whoa,” said Dean,
“What do you mean ‘town’? H...how many vampires are there?”

“In this city,” asked Oliver, “or this world?”

“W...world?” Dean sputtered.

Oliver decided not to overwhelm Dean with the latest census, which had this world’s vampire population at almost a million. “There are about five thousand in
“Five thousand?” Dean gasped. “That’s—but, you’d need to kill people—to eat—there’d be hundreds of—”

“Not really,” explained Oliver. “Vampires don’t usually kill people. They just feed for a while, then give the humans a potion that erases their memory. And there are salts that hide the bite wounds and make them heal almost
overnight.” Then Oliver thought to add, “You might have already been bitten and not even know it.”

Dean rubbed nervously at his neck. “H...how many humans have you bitten?” he asked.

“I—” Oliver felt weird talking about all this. *Then why am I?* he wondered to himself. He wasn’t sure, really. But he didn’t feel like
there was any harm in it. “None,” he said. “I mean, you don’t, until you’re older.” He glanced worriedly toward Emalie, wondering if any of this was going to go too far and freak her out, but she was still working over the sink, almost like Oliver was no more important than whatever was packed in all these boxes. “How much older?” Dean continued.
“It depends,” Oliver said. “Well, how old are you?” Oliver wondered what to tell them. He looked thirteen in human years, and felt and acted thirteen as well, but the truth was, he was sixty-three years old. Vampires were thought to live forever, but what seemed like forever to a human was actually just very slow aging. A vampire ages about five times slower than a
human. But wouldn’t they think it was creepy if Oliver told them he was almost five times older than they were? Then again, why should he care if they were freaked out? Still, Oliver decided on the easier number anyway. “Thirteen,” he said, then returned to the reason he was here. “Listen, if you publish that photo of me, the vampires will— Well, just
don’t.”

“I knew it!” Dean said stiffly. “We’re dead!”

Emalie didn’t answer. Oliver was starting to wonder what was wrong with her. “I’m serious,” Oliver said.

“Is that what you came here to do?” she asked, still not turning around.

“Me? What?”

“To kill us?” Emalie stood up from the sink.
“No,” Oliver stammered, “I...I just came to tell you to stop.”

“Why?” Emalie asked, turning around finally. She looked at him seriously. Her eyes were startlingly clear. Whatever trace of fear Oliver thought he smelled wasn’t showing on her face. And her gaze was making him feel weird.

“Um...” He wasn’t sure
how to answer her question. Telling her that he’d only come to save his own neck would make him sound selfish. Wait, why did he care how he sounded to these humans? This was ridiculous! But when he didn’t answer, Emalie started talking again.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” she said, holding up the photo from the sink, her face falling in frustration. “There is no
picture. See?”

Oliver studied the photo in Emalie’s hand. It showed his ceiling, with the cockeyed chandelier in sharp detail, but with only a big blurry spot beside it, where Oliver should have been.

“Just like all the others.” She pointed to the string of hanging photos. “Every time I try to print it, you just come out all blurry.”
Oliver studied the photos. Among a number of shots of other places around town that Oliver knew to be vampire hangouts were five copies of the photo that should have been of him. In every one, the area exactly where Oliver should have appeared was a wispy gray blur.

“I’ve tried printing it really dark,” Emalie explained, “Overexposing it,
changing the filter, the amounts of the chemicals... nothing works. There’s something wrong with the negative.” She tossed her tongs back into the sink with a splash. “So, I guess you’ll get your wish.”

“Not to mention we’ll get to stay alive,” Dean added, optimistically.

Oliver stared at the photos. “It’s weird,” he said
quietly.

“What?” Emalie asked.

“Vampires don’t really use cameras,” he said, thinking aloud. “It’s usually drawings or paintings. I don’t think I’ve ever had my picture taken before. I remember one time, my dad pulling me out of the way of a human camera.”

“Why?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know.” Oliver
had been too young to think to ask.

“So maybe cameras don’t work with vampires. Like mirrors,” Emalie offered.

“Maybe.” But then Oliver thought about what he’d just said. He knew of people, like Mr. VanWick, or Ken Tempest, who’d been in movies or on television. They showed up on film. Unless video was different—then
again, he’d never looked for vampire photographs. He didn’t know for sure that it didn’t work. But why would his parents tell him cameras were dangerous? Was it that they were dangerous only for him?

“Maybe,” Oliver found himself saying, “you need some ingredient you don’t have.”

“Like what?” Emalie
asked. Her eyes narrowed with interest.

Oliver hesitated. He hadn’t really thought through what he was saying, but when he met Emalie’s gaze, he found that he wanted to continue. “I don’t know, there might be a special chemical—an enchanted solution or something.”

“Enchanted?” Emalie looked even more curious.
“What are you talking about?”

“Well,” Oliver said. “I mean, vampires have access to science from the other worlds. I bet Dead Désirée would have something.”

“Okay, wait,” Dean said. He was squinting like his head was about to burst. “‘Worlds,’ with an ‘s.’ Like more than one?”

“Yeah.” Oliver tried to
think of how to make sense of this for a human brain. “This”—he flicked his hand to indicate the world they were currently in—“is a middle world. There are higher and lower ones, too.”

“Like how many?” asked Dean.

“Well, lots. I mean, there are infinite worlds. They’re all different. This one, and the other middle worlds, are the
only places where things are so—solid. In most of the others, demons don’t take physical form. I mean, in some worlds, a vampire can’t even be killed.”

“So then why don’t vampires go live there?” Emalie asked.

“Because,” Oliver continued, “we can’t leave this world. We’re sort of stuck here.”
Emalie was staring at him. Then she shook her head. “Wow. Okay. So who’s Dead Désirée?”

“She’s an apothecary downtown, in the Underground.”

“The Underground?” Dean asked.

“Yeah. It’s like, the center of town, for the vampires. It’s where all of our stores and restaurants are.”
“Like a mall,” said Dean, “for the undead.”
“Pretty much.”
“We should go,” Emalie said.
“What? No,” Oliver replied immediately. “No way—if a human ever got caught down there—” Not to mention the consequences for himself if he was ever caught bringing humans into the Underground.
“How about this weekend?” Emalie asked seriously.

“Emalie!” Dean protested. “Oh, come on, cousin!” She wasn’t exactly smiling, but she looked the happiest Oliver had seen her.

“Look, no,” Oliver said firmly, shaking his head. “That’s not happening.” Still, amazingly, he found himself considering it. What was his
problem? Emalie had him totally out of sorts.

“Come on,” Emalie urged. “It’s the only way you’re going to see that photo.”

“Why does anyone really need to see this photo?” Dean whined.

“No,” Oliver said as seriously as he knew how. The fact that the photo couldn’t be developed should
have been the best news he could have heard. So why would he want to help in getting it to work? Except—he did.

“We could totally…” Emalie started.

Suddenly, a voice shouted from upstairs, “Margie! Margie! You said we were going to eat soon!”

Emalie’s face fell. “That’s my dad,” she said to Oliver.
“All right, forget it, then.” All the air seemed to escape from her. She reached to the wall, flicked on the regular light, and then turned off the red lamp. “Come on, Dean,” she said sullenly, brushing past him.

“Yup.” Dean nodded, then glanced warily at Oliver. “What about—”

“He can show himself out,” Emalie said.
“But—”

Emalie looked right past Dean, to Oliver. “It was nice to finally meet you, and thanks for the warning.” She half-smiled at him.

Oliver felt a rush of nerves. He tried to think of something to say.

“Désirée’s,” Emalie added. “Think about it. We could go this weekend.”

“I—” Oliver began.
“Let’s go!” Emalie’s dad shouted. She sighed and disappeared among the boxes.

Dean awkwardly gathered the food, then gave Oliver a last wary look. He sighed and turned to go, but Oliver reached out and tapped his shoulder.

“Gah!” Dean gasped and dropped the bag once more.

“Sorry,” Oliver said flatly.
Dean took a deep breath. “What?”

“Who’s Margie?”

Dean looked at him quizzically, then his eyes flashed toward the ceiling. “Oh, that’s Emalie’s mom.”

Dean lowered his voice. “She’s been gone for two years now.”

“Gone where?”

Dean shrugged. “Nobody knows.” He turned to go, then
turned back. “So you’re not going to kill us?”

“No.”

Dean nodded like he was trying to believe it, but he still had a queasy look on his face as he left. When he was gone, Oliver turned back to the pictures of his house and his blurry form in them. What did it mean? Something…He felt like it meant something, for sure.
Before he left, he stepped over to the sink. Emalie had left a green hair elastic on the ledge by the faucet. With barely a thought, Oliver slipped it in his pocket. Then he headed back into the night, toward school.
Chapter 6

Now...and Then

THAT SCHOOL NIGHT PASSED with Oliver barely noticing. He frustrated Seth by tuning out during their conversations, and he annoyed Theo, Brent, and Maggots by not even reacting when they harassed him. He
also incurred a brief, wrathful lecture from Mr. VanWick, because he was openly staring out the window during the night’s history lesson. Gazing at the line of small houses across the street from the school, the twinkling Christmas lights and warm windows, going dark one by one as the school night passed, he couldn’t stop thinking about Emalie and
Dean, and the photo.

“This is important, Mr. Nocturne.” Mr. VanWick scowled, using the forces to slam Oliver’s textbook against his desk for effect. The other boys snickered.

“As a vampire, it is your duty to your society to be ready for the inevitable next time that human beings start killing one another. We must know the history that they keep
themselves so ignorant of, so that we can act accordingly and enjoy the chaos.”

“Sorry,” Oliver muttered.

“Now then,” Mr. VanWick continued, “today we continue our studies of the Aztec empire, a glorious period of human sacrifice unlike any other.”

Normally, Oliver enjoyed history, but, no sooner had Mr. Van Wick continued
orating than Oliver was lost in his own thoughts again.

At the end of the night, Oliver found himself hanging back as the rest of the kids quickly fled school. Once everyone was gone, he wandered the halls in the darkness. The neon demons were fading. The only light left was the slanting orange of streetlights through classroom doors.
He wasn’t sure what he was looking for until he found Emalie in a photo outside a first-floor classroom. There she was, middle row to the right in her seventh-grade class, barely noticeable, wearing a sweatshirt, her hair in a bandanna, while all the other students were dressed up. Dean towered up from the back row.
He found them both again, in a chorus photo, farther down the hall. Emalie was singing in the picture, but her smile wasn’t as bright as those of the girls around her. It looked forced. Oliver wondered if, like a vampire, music inherently made Emalie sad. Choral music was usually quite sad beneath its bright shiny surface, which made it a favorite of
vampires.

Oliver ran over the conversation in Emalie’s basement again, thinking about her request to go to the Underground, thinking about how he did want to see that photo. Distracted as he was, Oliver found himself eyeing a framed photo on the other side of the door. He now noticed that Emalie and Dean’s chorus photo had the
word *Now* above it, and above this other photo were the words *and Then*.

The black-and-white picture showed a school chorus from long ago. The students were dressed much more formally: the boys with their hair slicked back, the girls with bows. And there, in the middle row…

Was a vampire. She would have been hard for a
human to spot, but it was obvious to Oliver, despite the cheery bows in her hair and the smile on her face. A vampire in a human school chorus? Oliver remembered something from history class, about how vampires early in the last century had tried to live among the humans. They had called themselves Conformists. They had gone to great lengths, even using
special creams to withstand sunlight, but in the end, it hadn’t worked out. The Conformists were considered a shameful chapter in vampire history.

But wait—Oliver was looking at a vampire in a photograph. If this girl could appear clearly in a photo, then why hadn’t he? Had the Conformists done something special? Or was the truth
what Oliver was starting to suspect, that vampires *could* appear in photos, and it was only Oliver who couldn’t?

Oliver stared blankly at the photo, his head lost in confusing thoughts. What was wrong with him that he couldn’t be photographed? After a while, he swam out of his head and realized that his gaze had drifted away from the vampire girl. Now he was
staring at the face of the young music teacher standing to the side of the class. She looked happy, her hair up in the curls of the time, a wide smile on her face—

Suddenly, there was a flash in Oliver’s mind—a vision that seemed clearer and stronger than any dream. It was this woman’s face, smiling, looking down toward him tenderly. Behind her
there were strange, tiny lights, and formations, maybe buildings, it was hard to tell, because he was overwhelmed by her bright human eyes.

Oliver shook his head, and the image blinked out, leaving his vision bleached in white spots, like he’d been staring at a streetlight for too long. He looked down and found himself trembling—but why? Who was that woman?
It had almost seemed like a memory.

Maybe he’d seen her when he was little. It was always amazing how your brain could remember the strangest little details from so long ago. Yet, why would he remember this face out of the thousands he’d seen? And for that matter, why did Oliver feel his anxiety creeping over him now? His insides were
getting tight. He wanted to study the picture more carefully—

Just then, two hands grabbed him by the shoulders and hurled him down the hall.

“Wha—” Oliver sailed through the air, slamming to the tile floor and sliding into a trio of trash cans.

“I’m waiting out there for ten minutes.” Oliver looked up to see Bane marching
toward him, his green eyes blazing in bright lime.

Oh, no, Oliver thought. He’d completely forgotten that Bane had been waiting for him to walk home. Now he reached Oliver and yanked him to his feet by his backpack.

“Ow!” Oliver shouted.

“Come on, little lamb,” Bane sneered, dragging him stumbling down the steps
toward the back door.

“That hurts!” Oliver protested, thinking, too late, 
No! Don’t say anything!

But he had, and now Bane whirled to face him. “That hurts? That?” His nostrils flared and his eyes sparked. “Well, try this!” He grabbed Oliver’s shoulder and hurled him through the air. Oliver hit the back door, slamming it open, and tumbled out onto
the now-deserted playground. He slowly got to his feet, gathering his bag and rubbing his sore head. But then Bane was grabbing him again. “Oh, come on, already,” Bane muttered, and pushed Oliver toward the side of the school.

“Knock it off.” Oliver muttered, getting his feet under him and stalking off toward the street.

“Oooh,” Bane chided.
“Watch out.”

Oliver kept walking, and Bane fell into step beside him. Oliver glared up at him, but saw that the light had faded from Bane’s eyes. Now, he actually threw an arm around Oliver’s shoulders. “You gotta toughen up, bro,” he said reasonably. Then he continued, “Something’s going on with you. Older
brother can tell.”

Oliver’s anger immediately cooled to freezing worry. “Um—”

“Not sleeping all day,” Bane went on. “Lying to get to school early…”

They left the schoolyard and proceeded through the silent streets of sleeping houses. Oliver was shocked by Bane’s change of attitude. Why was he suddenly acting
like he cared? “You’re a vampire, for Hade’s sake,” Bane went on, and even patted Oliver’s shoulder. “When I saw you in there just now, you looked like you were about to cry or something.”

Oliver bit his lip, afraid to say anything. He did not trust this strangely concerned version of Bane, though at least he didn’t seem to know
about Emalie or the newspaper. Oliver tried to think of anything he could say to change the subject. “I…I’m just stressed about my homework.”

Bane sighed. “Homework sucks,” he agreed. “It’s a tough world, Ollie,” he said in a tone that was so brotherly that Oliver almost laughed at how strange it sounded. “I had a lot of hard years,
waiting for my demon to finally show up.” A note of bitterness had entered his voice. “But then you get to make up for it.” He patted Oliver’s shoulder again. “You sure there’s nothing else going on?”

“Not really,” Oliver lied. His head was throbbing less, but the ache was a reminder of what Bane might do if he knew about Oliver’s...
interaction with the humans. “Just, school sucks, that’s all.”

Bane didn’t reply for a moment. Oliver glanced up at him, and found his brother eyeing him oddly. He knows, Oliver thought, his nerves humming. He doesn’t know what, but he knows there’s something.

Finally, Bane shrugged. “Totally,” he agreed. “But
listen, you ever want to talk about anything, you let me know,” Bane finished. “It’s always better to talk about things before they get out of control, you know?”

Again, Oliver felt that weight to Bane’s words. “Yeah, okay,” he said, hoping that would be the end of the conversation. And it was. But Oliver didn’t trust Bane, brother or not, to leave it at
that. He’d have to be very careful.

Dinner was even less enjoyable than the previous morning had been. Oliver was beginning to wonder how long he could keep living these lies. And beneath them, he was as confused as ever by the photo mystery.

“And how was your math help this morning?” Phlox
“Fine,” Oliver said quickly, gulping wolf’s blood from his goblet.

“You’re making progress?” Sebastian asked.

“Mmm,” Oliver replied, now shoving a heaping spoon of crème brûlée into his mouth.

“Good,” Sebastian said. Oliver looked up to find him gazing curiously across the
Then he sipped from his goblet. “Ollie, don’t forget, I’m picking you up tomorrow for your doctor’s appointment. I’ll meet you at school.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah,” Bane piped up, “so don’t get all weird staring at the human pictures and losing track of time like you did today.” He flashed a hint of a grin, then continued
eating.

Oliver wanted to slay him.

“What are you talking about, Charles?” Phlox asked.

“Nothing,” Oliver interrupted quickly. “I was just looking at old photographs.”

“Of cows,” Bane added, eyes on his food, as if he were saying the most unimportant thing.
“Human photographs?” Phlox shared a sideways glance with Sebastian. “What would be interesting about those, dear?”

Oliver tried to think of something to say, but all he could think of was the blurry photo of himself, and how his parents had told him to avoid cameras. He knew he should just make up some excuse, but then he surprised himself...
by saying: “I don’t know, I just—I saw a vampire girl in one of the old photos.”

“Ahh,” Sebastian said, sighing like he was relieved, yet not making eye contact with Oliver. “Well, yes, for a while, some vampires tried to blend in with humans. They were called Conformists, but they—”

“But I thought,” Oliver interrupted, “a vampire
couldn’t get their picture taken?”

Phlox and Sebastian traded another lightning-fast glance. “Well,” Sebastian said, picking up his napkin and dabbing at his mouth, “back then, it was different, it ___

“Didn’t you tell me it was dangerous?” Oliver asked, trying to sound as innocent as he could.
“You lamb,” Bane chuckled. “How could a camera be dangerous?”

Phlox sipped from her goblet. Sebastian looked at Bane, but not with anger, almost with confusion. Both his parents seemed to be looking anywhere except at Oliver. He watched them, watched their faces twitch, and now he felt like he knew for certain. There is
something going on here, he thought. *All this means something.*

“Well, Oliver,” Phlox began. “Photographs just aren’t done. They’re unseemly and a proper vampire would much prefer a painting or—”

Oliver took a chance and interrupted again. “But, that’s not the same as dangerous—”

“They’re dangerous for
you, son,” Sebastian said quickly. “Now, it’s nothing you should worry about, but, it’s the flashes. You know how you get anxious—”

Phlox jumped in. “You’re very sensitive to certain kinds of light spectra.”

“I am?” asked Oliver. This was news to him.

“Yes,” Phlox added. “Many vampires are. That’s part of why cameras just
aren’t used in our world.”

Oliver nodded. “Oh,” he said.

A silence fell over the table.

Oliver kept quiet through the rest of dinner. He’d never felt anything like this before, the suspicion that his parents were keeping things from him. That they might even be lying to him. Sensitive to flashes? Oliver had just had
his picture taken with a flash—and he’d been fine. As he thought about what his parents had said, Oliver found that his same old worried thought, *There’s something wrong with me*, now had a different ending: *And maybe my parents know what it is.*

Oliver slept worse that day than ever before. In fact, he wasn’t sure that he’d slept at all. The one thought that
cheered him up was hoping he’d hear a footstep upstairs—that Emalie and Dean might show up again, but they didn’t.
Chapter 7

The Doctor and the Moonlight

OLIVER WAITED OUTSIDE AFTER school the next night. He sat on the front steps alone as the rest of the students caroused about. Finally, as the last stragglers were wandering home, he heard the rustling of
a crow’s wings. A shadow of a bird landed in a pool of orange streetlight on the sidewalk. Swirls of black mist rose from it, and moments later the bird flew off. Sebastian hurried up the walk, his boots clicking in the stillness, the collar of his long black coat upturned against a cold, clear night.

“Sorry I’m late,” Sebastian groaned, checking
his watch as they hurried down the street. "Things are particularly busy at work." He didn’t sound happy about it.

They reached a wide intersection, silent at three a.m. save for the hum of the streetlights and the clicking of the traffic signal from red to green. Sebastian checked his watch. "We’ll take a cab," he said. "I put a call in to
Miles. He should be along soon.”

A moment of silence passed. A hunched man in a hooded jacket hobbled by, pushing a shopping cart. Oliver wrinkled his nose. It was a human, but his scent was so neglected, so shrouded in death, that he might easily have been mistaken for a zombie. In vampire terms, he was spoiled and a sad waste.
Phlox had a friend, Chloe, who volunteered in human soup kitchens, trying to rehabilitate cases like this. She would add special ingredients to the free meals in order to help detoxify the poisoned blood. It was rare, though, for a human to come back from a condition like this homeless man was in. Oliver listened as the man mumbled to himself,
following well-worn loops of thought over and over. He could feel the despair, the whole rooms of a once bright mind that had shut down, and he wondered how humans could let one of their own get to that point.

“This will be good,” Sebastian said, clapping Oliver on the back.

Oliver didn’t reply.

“Dr. Vincent always helps
when you’re having”—Sebastian paused like he was looking for a word—“issues.” Oliver felt like asking Sebastian what issues he was talking about. After all, Dad thought Oliver was having the demon dreams, didn’t he? That should have been a good thing. So, then he must have been referring to how Oliver had been caught looking at human pictures. That didn’t
seem like it was enough to be an *issue*, unless Dad knew more about what had been going on with Oliver lately than he was admitting. Oliver was starting to wonder if Dad had believed his lie about the demon dreams at all.

But Oliver was looking forward to this doctor’s trip. These visits had helped with his anxiety and trouble sleeping in the past. *Except*
those other times, I didn’t know that I’m the only kid who needs to go to the doctor every year. Oliver promised himself that he would try to pay more attention to what Dr. Vincent said this time, to see if he could gather what these visits were really all about.

“It’s always hard for you around this time of year,” Sebastian continued. “Just
remember, Ollie, you’re a very special boy.” He eyed the passing vagrant. “A special boy among a special breed. Vampires are lucky, compared to the humans. We get to experience and perceive things they could never fully grasp. Their lives are so short. They approach everything either with desperate passion or desperate fear. Their world
can seem vital and interesting, but only because they are so ignorant.”

“Okay,” Oliver said. He didn’t understand what his dad was getting at, except the words were making him feel defensive about Emalie and Dean. Vampires always talked about humans like they were lower beings, but Oliver hadn’t felt that way about Emalie, though maybe
slightly about Dean. And it almost sounded as if Sebastian was trying to talk Oliver out of any interest in humans. *Because he knows,* Oliver thought worryingly. Or, if he didn’t know, he at least suspected.

A cab screeched to a halt beside them. Sebastian leaned down and peered in the window, then smiled. “Hello, Miles,” he said, opening the
door. Oliver slid into the backseat beside him.

“Good evening, Nocturnes,” Miles Frisht said with a feigned air of manners, flashing his one remaining eye at them. He was a gangly vampire, wearing a beat-up cowboy hat cockeyed on his head. “Where can Miles whisk you off to on this lovely eve?”

“Dr. Vincent, at the
Gasworks,” said Sebastian.

“Aye.” Miles nodded, and sped off, turning on the radio as he did so.

In contrast to Miles’s ragged appearance and the chaotic way that he careened around town, the music that filled his cab was a deeply sad string quartet. Oliver glanced forward to see that they were listening to KBYT, a vampire pirate station that
played from midnight until dawn. Other than Bane and those his age, who preferred the latest meta-world dub, broadcast subversively on the human station KEXP, vampires mostly listened to complex classical music. Oliver recognized what was currently playing: the familiar haunting melodies from one of the late movements of the *Melancholia*, the master-work
of vampire music. Its early movements were centuries old, and it was still being added to. The full piece was rarely performed and, when it was, it was a fantastic event, as it took over two months to play every movement. Hearing it now, Oliver felt himself relax just a bit, watching the dark homes blur by to the contemplative sound of cellos and violins.
A few hectic turns later, they were pulling up to the Gasworks. “Thanks, Miles,” said Sebastian, handing him three square silver coins with holes in the center, called myna. Vampires had been using the currency since ancient Greece, in situations where other forms of payment, like a fresh young animal, or bone credits, weren’t practical.
They started across a long grass park along the edge of a wide lake, just north of downtown. In the center of the park was a labyrinth of black metal towers: an old gas refinery long shut down. It was surrounded by a high chain-link fence that kept the contaminated site safe from humans. The hulking cylinders stood in dark silhouette against the blinking
city buildings and the glowing Space Needle, across the water.

A raw wind peppered Oliver and Sebastian with spray from the lake. They leaped nimbly over the fence, and Oliver followed his dad into the maze of black metal towers, spun together with a web of catwalks above. Their shoes clattered in the gravel and rust flakes.
Sebastian stopped at a black tower no different than the others, except that three stories up, near the top of the tower, there was a single, glowing silver Skrit symbol: an upside-down eye inside a square. He knocked on the metal wall, creating a hollow thud. For a moment, there was no response, then the squealing echo of deadbolts being turned. A curved
rectangular door pulled inward, and warm light spilled out. Oliver followed Sebastian in.

In stark contrast to the decrepit exterior, they entered a nicely appointed waiting room. It was small, lit with low lamps, and lined with chairs, three of which were filled: two with older women and one with an extremely ancient man who had long
since lost his skin to time.

Sebastian moved to the receptionist’s desk, where a striking young woman sat at a computer. “Nocturne to see Dr. Vincent,” he said. Oliver sat down, and watched as his dad popped open his briefcase and removed a plain-looking legal folder, which he handed to the receptionist. Oliver recognized his medical
records. He looked down at the stack of magazines on the table beside him: *Seattle Tombs and Flats, Bloodlust, Us Weekly*…

“Hell’s speed to you, my boy,” a razor-thin voice hissed from beside him. Oliver turned to find the ancient man leaning toward him, his leathery face only inches from his. His teeth were still brilliant white, and
he wore a tweed suit with a bow tie. Oliver had rarely seen a man so old and guessed he might be well more than six hundred. The whites of his eyes had long since turned to black, and his pupils had dulled to a luminous gray that indicated almost total blindness. His wrinkled nose was doubly active, sniffing the air between them. Oliver could
smell the time on him.

“Hi,” Oliver said, trying to be polite.

“I hope he comes to you soon,” the man hissed, the effort of speaking making his body shake.

Oliver nodded respectfully, not knowing what the old-timer was talking about.

“The wind wants to take me,” the man went on, “But I
tell it, *No, Illisius is coming, and I don’t mean to rot to dust before we’re finally freed from this prison!* That’s what I tell that cursed wind.”

The man’s teeth clicked eagerly.

“*That’s great,*” Oliver said, and turned back to the magazines—

But the man grabbed Oliver’s shirt collar with his bone hands and spun him
around. “Don’t take your destiny lightly, Oliver. You are the one who can open the Gate.” He pulled Oliver even closer, with ten times the strength Oliver would have thought possible. His skinless face stretched into a grin. “You are the one who will journey to N—”

A hand firmly pushed the old-timer away. “Excuse me, sir,” said Sebastian sternly.
“Have to get my boy in for his checkup. Come along, Oliver.” Dad was smiling, yet he quickly pulled Oliver up out of his chair.

The man was scowling at the interruption, but then he broke into a wide smile. “Yes, yes,” he cooed. “Off to the doctor for the vessel! Careful with my merchandise! I’m not to dust before the ascension!”
Sebastian moved Oliver quickly across the room. “Never mind him,” Sebastian said, before Oliver could even form a question as to what the old man was talking about.

The smiling receptionist held open a dark wooden door. She led them down a short hallway to an elevator. Brass doors slid open, revealing a cylindrical copper elevator car.
“The doctor will see you in exam room three,” the receptionist said, her smile unbreakable.

The doors slid closed. Three was the top floor. The elevator began to rise.

“Old ones are like that,” Sebastian started saying. “He’s almost at the end. It could be another century, or maybe only decades. It’s a confusing time for them.
What was he saying to you, anyway?”

Oliver shrugged. “I couldn’t really understand him,” he said, yet another lie coming so easily. Oliver supposed the old one was off his rocker but, still, what was that all about? What had he meant by a destiny?

The elevator slowed, and the doors slid open, revealing a wide, circular room.
Floodlights stood on metal stands, beaming white light into the center of the room. The effect made the dark iron walls seem almost invisible. In the center of the room was a standing contraption. It was folded open like a clamshell, each side made of silver mesh shaped like a body. Oliver stiffened when he saw it. Even though he’d been in the force resonance imager
before, the sight of it always made him squeamish.

“Ahh, Ollie, welcome,” a friendly voice echoed from the darkness, and Dr. Vincent emerged from the shadows behind the lights. He was a young doctor, maybe two hundred fifty years old, with broad shoulders, a chiseled face, and slicked blond hair. Oliver had heard his parents say on more than one
occasion that they were lucky to have such a young, bright physician around. Dr. Vincent had worked for years in research in the asylum colony of lower Morosia, a highly respected facility, if controversial for its methods.

Dr. Vincent buttoned his white coat and stuck out his hand as Sebastian and Oliver reached the center of the room. Oliver put out his hand,
and the doctor shook it vigorously.

“Hi,” Oliver said.

“Good to see you, sir,” Dr. Vincent said to him, smiling, then turning to Sebastian. “Seb, nice to see you, too.”

Sebastian handed him the manila folder. “Just the usual checkup today, Doctor?”

“Annual physical, same as always,” Dr. Vincent said
cheerily. “So? Oliver, ready?”

Oliver stepped up to the open, body-shaped FRI shell and turned around, backing into half. As his back met the cold metal, he shivered, feeling a ripple of worry, but he reminded himself that he was hopeful: *Maybe this is all I need,* Oliver thought, wondering if that could be possible.

“Here we go,” Dr.
Vincent said. He strapped Oliver’s arms in place at his sides, and then his ankles. Then he stepped back and closed the front half of the shell. As soon as the latch clicked, there was a sound like ruffling fabric, and the entire mesh shell shrunk and tightened to fit exactly around Oliver. The silver threads pressed cool against his face. No movement was possible
except for his eyes, and his view was blurred by the mesh. Oliver vaguely saw Sebastian taking a step back. Oddly, he didn’t look like he enjoyed watching this.

Dr. Vincent turned to a console beside the imager. Its brass surface was inlaid with controls and gauges. He pulled a lever and a deep humming overwhelmed Oliver’s senses. He felt
himself beginning to rise. The imager moved steadily upward, stopping when his feet were equal with the doctor’s shoulders.

“All right, Oliver,” Dr. Vincent said, dialing in settings on the console. “This will be the standard checkup. You’ll feel some electric conduction as the imager identifies your force readings. As they start to appear in
spectrum around you, you might get a little light-headed.”

Oliver was sure he would. The process always put him to sleep.

The machine began to vibrate. Oliver could feel the electric current running through his body, charging particles and heating up the forces. The doctor fiddled with more knobs. Sparks
began to softly crackle along the mesh encasing Oliver. Light began to jump out from the imager, making arcs like solar flares that spiraled around him, flashing in colors across the spectrum.

Oliver could feel heat and his body humming lightly. The colors increased in brilliance. Dr. Vincent backed away and appraised the show of spiraling light. A computer
screen lit up in the shadows behind him and began recording data.

Oliver had a basic idea of what was happening. Vampires were powered by forces. Some of those were life forces, supplied by blood, yet many were crossover forces, from other worlds. Those things that humans called mystical power, or enchantment, were really just
the brief appearances, in this world, of forces from somewhere else. Because vampires were undead, they were just disconnected enough from the reality around them that they could feel those forces. Oliver only understood those basics. Vampire scientists and scholars spent centuries trying to understand the physics of the parallel worlds.
The mesh cage was a special receptor for forces and showed their presence and intensity in shades of color. Every vampire had a unique signature of forces. Dr. Vincent was reading Oliver’s now.

And yes, the light show, and humming, and warmth of the electricity was making Oliver sleepy. His eyes began to flutter. The buzzing and
light was all around him. It was peaceful. Oliver’s eyes slid closed and he fell into a deep sleep.

Except the sleep didn’t last like it usually did.

Oliver usually woke up when the machine had shut off, but this time his eyes snapped open early, overwhelmed by the familiar anxious feeling that always
kept sleep away.

He found himself lying flat on his back. He was still in the FRI cage, but it had rotated, so that he was looking straight up at the ceiling. And the ceiling had opened. Brilliant, pale white light was flooding down. Oliver squinted and saw the full moon directly overhead and a ring of mirrors around the rim of the open rooftop.
They were gathering the moonlight, focusing it down through the roof—and onto him.

Straining to look toward his feet, Oliver could see that his whole body was surrounded by a bone-white glow. No, it was his body that was glowing, like he was absorbing the moonlight. Just then, a humming that he hadn’t noticed revved to a
higher pitch. The mirrors brightened. The intensity of the light increased, and Oliver’s glow increased as well. He felt a cool, tingly surge through his body.

What was going on? He never remembered this happening during a checkup before. But then again, the FRI had usually knocked him out. Had this always happened and he just never
knew it? Then Oliver heard a voice from beside him.

“Almost finished,” Dr. Vincent said softly. “I’m giving him a longer dose than usual. The increased vessel strength should make his anxieties calm down.” Oliver peered out of the corner of his eye. Dr. Vincent and Sebastian were standing in the shadows by the computer console. Dr. Vincent was
writing in the manila folder. “Now, you say,” he continued, “that there’s been some insomnia, and you think, some form of human sympathizing syndrome.”

“I…I can’t be sure,” Sebastian murmured, sounding worried, “I mean, he won’t admit anything’s wrong, but…Listen, you don’t think we did—we’ve done—something wrong to
him, do you?”

“No,” Dr. Vincent said with a professional’s certainty. “Everything’s been done according to the oracles, and according to the best scientific theory. Unless there’s some leftover issue on account of his origin.”

“How could there be?” Sebastian asked in a hush.

“I don’t think there is,” Dr. Vincent assured him.
But Sebastian continued, “I mean, we did everything right, didn’t we? And even so, there’s no way he should be able to remember any of that. He was a baby.”

“Of course not.” Dr. Vincent paused. “Though there was that odd reading in his initial workup. But that was so many years ago now, and it’s never shown up again.”
Sebastian’s tone grew dark. “You told us he would be fine.”

“Look, Seb, he is fine. Everybody’s wired differently. Kid’s probably just scared about growing up. Who isn’t?” Dr. Vincent went on, “The bottom line is, all my readings show that these treatments are working. A little anxiety is a small price to pay. Besides it shouldn’t
surprise you. Part of your reason for choosing Oliver over all the other profiles was his emotional capacity, and I’m confident these treatments will keep the anxiety in check.”

“But what if they don’t?”

There was a pause, then Dr. Vincent said, “Well, there’s always been a chance he could go insane. But insanity has certain
advantages, and that’s treatable, too.”

“Not if it destroys him,” Sebastian noted.

“True, but even if it does...we can always try again.”

Sebastian only sighed.

Oliver struggled to make sense of what he was hearing. What treatments? Weren’t they just checkups? Why would they make him go
insane? And what had happened to him when he was a baby?

Now he felt another surge of the focused moonlight energy. It felt like his body was humming from head to toe.

“All right, that’s it,” Dr. Vincent said, and with the flick of a switch the mirrors went dark. Oliver’s moon glow faded, and large gears
started to grind. The ceiling slid closed. The cage began to rotate Oliver back to a standing position.

Oliver closed his eyes most of the way, yet watched, squinting, as Dr. Vincent scribbled final notes in the folder, and then handed it back to Sebastian, who already had his briefcase open.

“Tell your bosses not to
worry,” Dr. Vincent added. “Though I’m hoping you haven’t mentioned these little anxiety bouts to them.”

“No, I haven’t,” Sebastian muttered.

“I think that’s best. Half-Light is too jittery as it is, in my opinion. Things are fine.”

“Mmm,” Sebastian replied as he closed his briefcase and spun the locks. He didn’t sound convinced.
The cage reached an upright position. Dr. Vincent approached, holding a clear syringe. The fluid inside was a swirling silver. Oliver shut his eyes fully and tried to look fast asleep, forcing himself not to wince as the needle stuck into his arm. He felt a surge of awakening spread through him. He waited another moment, then opened his eyes to find
Sebastian and the doctor appraising him with relaxed smiles.

Dr. Vincent unstrapped Oliver and helped him down. “Welcome back, kiddo.”

As Oliver steadied his wobbly legs, Sebastian clapped him on the back. “You never can make it through the imager without a nap, can you?”

“Guess not,” Oliver said
with a grin.

But inside he wasn’t smiling. As they left Dr. Vincent’s office, Oliver watched his dad treat him normally, the doctor treat him normally, the receptionist… And yet, he wasn’t normal, was he? Oliver didn’t understand most of what he’d heard, but he understood enough to know that whatever was wrong with
him was much more than just some sleepless nights. It was something that everyone seemed to know about, except him.

Unlike in past years, Oliver felt no better after the visit. The rest of that night and through the sleepless day, Oliver’s head spun. Who was in on it, whatever it was? His parents, Dr. Vincent, and it sounded like the Half-Light
Consortium, too. What about Mr. VanWick? What about the other kids at school? Did their parents know? Bane? And how could Oliver find out what they knew? Nobody would tell him if he asked, would they? Besides, that would just show them that Oliver knew something was going on. That didn’t seem like a good idea. Which left...
Emalie and Dean. Were they really his only choice? But how could they help him figure out what was going on? Well, maybe there was a way, but it wasn’t going to be easy.
Chapter 8

Into the Underground

THAT SATURDAY, A LONG rain gave way to a deep foggy night, hiding each hill of the city from the other. The Space Needle was devoured to its waist. Gaps between
houses became voids of the unknown. The cones of misty light beneath streetlights became islands of safety. In the downtown shopping center, the Christmas lights that covered every store entrance created a world of cheeriness that felt like a haven from the ominous dark. Here, revelers gathered to ride a merry-go-round, get fun family pictures, and go to
a choral concert, the kind of somber music that few humans listened to unless it was the holidays.

The All-State choir performed beside a giant Christmas tree, which was almost as bright and cheery as the trendy coffee shop beside it. A crowd stood huddled together against the mist, listening as the pure young voices sang. They were
finishing Handel’s *Messiah*, singing stirring chords sad enough to move even the silent hearts of the stone gargoyles that watched from their perches high above. Between them, Oliver crouched on a thin ledge, watching silently.

The conductor snapped his arms and the chorus went silent, their last note echoing upward until it was
swallowed by the fog. There was a deathly moment of quiet as the depth of the song lingered, then the humans began to clap. Now the choir burst into “Jingle Bells.” Oliver watched as, while more humans joined the crowd to revel in the cheery music, a few others gathered their kids and turned to leave—vampire families. Yet two humans also
turned and departed. They’d been standing with a set of adults and two other gangly children. Now they pushed their way to the edge of the crowd, looked warily about, then headed across the plaza, toward the edge of the cheery light.

Oliver slipped off the ledge and crawled down the wall headfirst. When he reached the height of the
streetlights, he stopped, let go with his hands, and lunged into space, soaring over the milling shoppers. He spectralized just enough that with his charcoal sweatshirt and black corduroys, he was no more noticeable than a pigeon swooping overhead.

He landed on the roof of the carousel. He couldn’t levitate well enough to land without a sound, but he did
slow himself enough so that the light thud of his arrival was drowned out by the off-key carousel music and the laughter of its riders.

Oliver leaped again, back up into the dark fog. This time he landed on the top of a long, narrow roof. It was a fountain. In the summer, water dropped from either side of this stone roof into troughs on the ground,
creating a long hallway with liquid walls. There was a metal walkway beneath the roof, so that one could walk between the two sheets of water. The fountain was dry now. Skateboarders were doing jumps and slides along the stone benches on either side of it, their boards scraping and clacking.

Oliver peered under the roof. Two people stood on the
metal walkway. “Hey.”

“Dah!” Dean jumped.

Emalie spun around, her face startled as well, but then she punched Dean. “Dean!”

She rolled her eyes.

Oliver flipped down onto the walkway. “Hi,” he said. He wasn’t sure what to say next. “You got my note.”

“Of course, I got it.”

Oliver had left the scrap of paper wedged beneath her
desk early Friday morning. “So, you brought the negative.”

Emalie nodded and tapped her vest pocket. “Got it.”

Oliver looked at her. Dean looked at Oliver, then at Emalie. “Emalie,” Dean said.

Emalie only stood, hands in the pockets of her vest.

Oliver held out his hand. “Can I have it?”
Emalie didn’t move. Dean started to fidget. “Emalie, come on.” He checked his watch. “We told my parents an hour and a half.”

Emalie only stared at Oliver. “We’re going with you,” she said.

“What?!” Dean threw his hands in the air. “Oh, great. Knew this was going to happen!”

“No,” Oliver replied
beneath Dean’s ranting. “Yes,” Emalie nodded. “No!” said Oliver, feeling more flustered.

“We go, or you don’t get the photo.”

Dean took a few frustrated steps, his large feet clanging on the grating, then spun around. “Emalie, just give it to him!”

Oliver stared at Emalie. She stared back. Then with a
shrug he said, “All right.” He turned and headed down the fountain walkway, away from them. “Forget it.”

“I can’t believe the vampire is the one whose head is on straight,” Dean muttered as they watched Oliver leave. Emalie didn’t reply.

Oliver kept walking, listening to Dean and wishing, for a moment, that
there was a cliff nearby, so that he could just kind of bump Dean off. Because even though Oliver looked like he was leaving, he wasn’t. Emalie had one more second to give in....

He reached the end of the walkway. Emalie hadn’t spoken. All right then. He’d had a feeling this would happen. Shaking his head, Oliver ducked out of the
walkway and climbed back to the roof of the fountain. He reappeared a moment later, walking back toward Emalie and Dean holding a large lump of fabric.

“What’s that?” Dean asked.

“Put these on,” Oliver said, holding out the pile. Emalie almost smiled. She reached out and held up two hooded coats. “Here,”
she said, handing one to Dean.

“You have to be kidding,” Dean whined.

“Just take it,” commanded Emalie.

Dean did, but then his face scrunched. “It smells, like—horrible!”

“That’s the point,” Oliver explained. “We have to hide your scent.”

Emalie began slipping on
the long, hooded green coat. It was far too big for her and hung down over her hands and below her knees. As she pulled the hood up over her head, she looked like she might be sick.

“Yeah…” Dean was saying as he held the other jacket, a purple one, in front of him, his arms stiff. “But this seems kinda extreme.”

“You think this is
“extreme?” Oliver said, letting a note of darkness tint his voice. “If anyone in the Underground smells a live human…”

“We get it,” Emalie said, “Come on, Dean.”

Dean reluctantly put on the coat. He had just slipped on the second sleeve when he froze. “Wait, you just said… that means these jackets aren’t from humans?”
Oliver couldn’t help but smile a little. “They’re from humans, just not living ones.” He started off down the walkway again.

“Oh, no…” Dean started grabbing at the jacket.

“Dean, relax,” Emalie grabbed his arm.

“But these are—did you steal these from graves? Of course you did, you—”

“No,” Oliver replied
impatiently, “I didn’t steal them. I bought them from two zombies over in Denny Park.”

“Z—” Dean’s mouth fell open.

“You should be grateful,” said Oliver, enjoying Dean’s terror a bit. “It wasn’t easy. Zombies are very possessive of their things.”

“Then how did you get these?” Emalie asked.

“Well,” Oliver said,
turning to walk again. “There are some things that they like more.”

“Don’t zombies eat b… brains?” Dean called from behind.

Oliver ignored him. He reached the end of the fountain walkway and stopped in the shadows. He crouched and lifted up one of the heavy sections of metal grating beneath their feet.
Emalie and Dean reached him and looked down into a sewer drain.

“Um…” Dean croaked.

“Now listen,” Oliver said. “Stay behind me, and no matter what happens, keep your hoods up and your heads down.” He dropped out of sight.

Emalie and Dean climbed gingerly down a metal ladder. As they reached the sewer
tunnel below, Oliver helped them step over to a ledge. They started forward, black water rushing beside them. In moments, the darkness became complete. Oliver felt Emalie’s hand grasp the back of his sweatshirt.

“I can’t see a thing,” Dean muttered.

After a minute, light began to return—a soft green glow. A thin vein of neon
appeared on the ceiling of the tunnel, providing more than enough light for vampire eyes, and just barely enough for human. Still, Emalie kept hold of Oliver’s sweatshirt.

They reached an intersection, lit with sconces of magmalight. Oliver hadn’t taken this route before, so he turned to the wall and whispered, “Anemoi.”

The wall blurred and a
map appeared, floating before them in sparkling light. It was a three-dimensional depiction of the sewer system and the streets above, drawn in tubular lines of molten light, from searing whites to warm magentas, that sparked with bits of flame. The map resembled a square funnel, with the Underground Center dropping down out of the middle. Oliver pinched the
corners of the map and twisted and turned it. It fluttered like fabric in front of them, sparking and hissing.

He zoomed in on a section and studied their location.

“Wow,” Emalie breathed “It’s a map?” Oliver nodded. “What are these?” She pointed to a scrawled Skrit symbol.

“Those are Skrit,” Oliver
said. “It’s a vampire language.”

“They look like they’re written in blood,” Dean whispered.

“What does this one mean?” Emalie pointed to one. It was a spiraling shape set within a square, thicker and thinner at points, as if drawn with a brush. There was a crimson tinge to the color:
“That’s the Underground Center,” Oliver replied. “The boundary indicates this world. Square corners are the boundaries of matter. The spiral is the Underground. It says more than that, but I haven’t learned much Skrit yet.”
Emalie ran her finger through it. The symbol flamed when she touched it, and a soft, whispering voice announced, “Westlake Underground Entrance: Access to level nine, and express elevators to charion station. Entrance is point-three kilometers from your current location, due south.”

Oliver double-checked their route. “Come on.” He
blew out the map, then turned and continued.

They were now walking down a major tunnel that sloped steadily downward. Its wide walls were lit with sconces and adorned with a series of long tapestries. The candelabras, tucked into half-moon recesses in the floor, cast their wild shadows on the walls.

“I didn’t think it would be
“What?” asked Oliver.

“Warm. It feels warm down here,” she continued. “Not just the air, but like, the light and the art, and …” She halted, pulling Oliver to a stop by the back of his sweatshirt. “Oh.”

Oliver turned to find her staring wide-eyed at the tapestry beside them, yet the
fascination in her eyes had turned cold.

“Y...you were saying?” Dean muttered softly.

Oliver glanced up and down the hall at the long weaving they were passing: It depicted a wide room of stone. Every few feet along the tapestry, there was a collection of hooded figures employing ancient means of torture upon shackled
prisoners, involving tubs of water, ropes and weights, flames. Oliver wasn’t sure which specific Inquisition it was, maybe the Spanish, but there had been so many throughout the Middle Ages, they all kind of blended together. The particular moment in the tapestry that had Emalie transfixed involved two children, who were being made to face a
beast of some kind, something from the Underworld. Oliver wished she hadn’t seen it.

“Their faces,” Emalie said softly. “I’ve never seen anything so scared-looking, it’s—” She turned away, swallowing hard.

“It’s just because it’s accurate,” Oliver offered, trying to be helpful.

“Why would you want to
show that so accurately?” she muttered.

“Well—”

“Let’s just go,” Emalie said quickly, pushing Oliver forward. He heard Dean sigh behind her. Oliver tried to think of something else to say about the imagery, about how it wasn’t the vampires who were doing the awful things in that tapestry, but decided just to leave it.
They walked for five minutes, silent except for their footfalls. On either side, they began to see abandoned chambers: the deep, forgotten basements of buildings, with dusty tables and chairs scattered about. They passed a cobwebbed storefront, a general store. There were still barrels and sacks of pioneer supplies piled inside.

“I took a tour through
stuff like this once,” Dean mused quietly. “There used to be bars and shops beneath the streets.”

“Those were good times to be a vampire,” said Oliver, “I mean, you know, ’cause…” He trailed off, still feeling uncertainty from Emalie.

They turned right, then left, and finally the tunnel leveled out. Oliver began to
hear the din of activity up ahead.

“How much farther is—” Dean began.

“Tsss,” Oliver warned.

Two vampires were approaching: a man and woman, well dressed, hooked at the elbows. The woman carried a tiny triangular purse that was actually a cage, with a black cloth over it. Something scurried and
hissed inside. The man was in the middle of a story but paused as the two groups passed. Oliver nodded to him, hoping that Dean would have the good sense to keep his head down.

“Not really the sort to be hanging around with,” the man said, nose upturned at the scent of zombies.

“They’re my servants,” Oliver said quickly, keeping
his pace brisk.

“Hmph,” added the woman, and her purse rattled as if in agreement.

As they passed by, Oliver listened to make sure the couple kept walking. They did. Oliver felt Emalie grab his sweatshirt again.

“Servants?” she hissed.

“Vampires sometimes have zombies as servants,” explained Oliver. “It was the
safest thing to say.”

“Oh, man,” Dean said hoarsely. “That was crazy. We should go back.”

“Too late,” Oliver said. They’d reached the end of the sewer line. Beside them, the water continued into a dark tunnel. In front of them was a solid wall, with a wide set of platinum double doors. The same spiral-in-a-square Skrit had been etched across
the seam of the doors.

“Ready?” Oliver asked.

Neither replied, but Enalie nodded sternly.

Oliver pushed through the doors. They descended a long, carpeted staircase. When they reached the bottom, they found themselves standing on the edge of a bustling stream of people moving past them in both directions on a wide
walkway that curved away to the left and right. The ceiling rose high above them. Well-dressed vampires, young and old, hurried along, pulling kids, arms full of bags, long coats trailing behind them.

Oliver headed directly through the jostling crowd, leading Emalie and Dean to the other side of the walkway, where they reached a stone railing that looked out on the
full expanse of the Underground Center.

They were standing on a ring-shaped stone walkway, lined with shops, which encircled a huge, bottomless chasm. Looking down, they could see more ringed levels beneath them.

“How many floors are there?” Emalie whispered.

“Nine,” Oliver replied.

At first glance, the Center
looked like a human shopping mall, arranged in the shape of a cylinder, with gleaming stores and throngs of shoppers—yet the shops were lit with torches and tubes and globes of molten magmalight. At regular intervals around the ringed levels, instead of escalators or elevators, there were only gaps. The crowds of well-dressed vampires simply walked off the edges,
then levitated across, or up and down, from one level to the next. Children who had not yet mastered the forces scaled the walls like insects.

A young vampire man stepped up just beside Emalie. Without breaking stride, he hopped onto the stone railing and stepped off, levitating smoothly across the chasm to a different floor. There were other vampires
out in the space, doing the same. In the center of the chasm, they veered to avoid an enormous torrent of falling water.

High above, countless sewer pipes shot out of the walls, near the high rock ceiling. The pipes crisscrossed the space, and had all been sliced open at the center. Their combined waters formed this huge
cascade, which dropped down the chasm into unseen depths that were clouded by steam.

“What’s down there?” Dean asked.

“The ninth level is the charion station,” Oliver explained as Emalie and Dean peered over his shoulders. It wasn’t entirely dark below the ninth level. There was a faint glow of red light and heat amid the steam
clouds. “Below that is the Yomi,” said Oliver. “That’s the black market. I don’t think anyone really knows how deep that goes.”

“Guh,” Dean muttered queasily, leaning away from the railing.

Oliver looked to Emalie, whose expression of wonder had finally returned. “I guess it’s pretty amazing,” he offered. “It’s really nothing
compared to the Underworld cities.”

She nodded slightly, then looked around further, and suddenly her eyes narrowed. “Are those—” she whispered, “are those Christmas trees?”

Every level was dotted with festive trees, decorated with red lights, silver garlands, and glittering ornaments. Some ornaments were simply Skrit symbols
fashioned from iron, while others were shaped like cages, with tiny lizards scurrying inside.

“We celebrate Longest Night,” said Oliver. “It’s the biggest vampire holiday. Well, Festival of Waning Sun, in the fall, is almost as big, but—”

“But—how can vampires have Christmas trees?” For the first time, Oliver saw a
look on Emalie’s face that wasn’t wonder or fear, but disappointment.

“Well,” Oliver said, feeling a bit defensive, “Longest Night coincides with the winter solstice. I mean—vampires have been celebrating celestial holidays for thousands of years. Besides, those aren’t technically Christmas trees. There were these Germanic
tribes and Wiccans, who decorated trees for the winter solstice way before people started using them for Christmas.” Oliver decided not to mention that those Germanic tribes sometimes decorated their trees with the bodies of their slaves.

Emalie gazed at him blankly. “What?”

Oliver couldn’t tell whether she was intrigued or
repulsed. “There’s only been a Christmas for like, two thousand years,” he went on. “There’s been a Longest Night for a lot longer than that.”

Emalie considered this, but then she shook her head. “Christmas is about giving and love. Demons can’t—”

“We love,” Oliver said, and felt a surge of embarrassment. “And we
give gifts, too, for Longest Night.” Oliver stopped himself. There was no need to get into what those gifts were. He thought about what to tell her next. There was one choice fact that Emalie might enjoy. “Do you really think,” said Oliver, “that the only reason the original Santa Claus snuck into human homes was to leave them presents?”
“Santa Claus is only a story,” Dean said, sounding like a sad child.
Oliver just shrugged.
“All right,” Emalie said finally, with an almost-smile.
“What do you mean?”
“Think about it.” Oliver relaxed a bit, seeing that he was starting to win Emalie back over. “The presents, the legends, the costume. It’s a small price to pay for being
invited into thousands of human homes.”

“You’re saying that he’s not human,” said Emalie. Oliver raised his eyebrows. “Okay, we get it.” She glared at him, but the spark had returned to her eyes. “Where is Dead Désirée’s?”

Oliver nodded. “Third floor, come on.”

Emalie took hold of Oliver’s sweatshirt again as
he merged back into the crowd. They passed the windows of clothing stores, where vampire models were dressed in fashionable outfits of leather and Gore-Tex; a luggage store featuring coffin trunks; several candy and cake confectioners; a skin and tooth care store where a white-coated man was bending over a customer, demonstrating the latest nano-
diamond stiletto tooth file; an oil portrait studio...

Every now and then, Emalie’s or Dean’s gaze would cause them to stray from the line behind Oliver, and they would be jostled by passing vampires. “Heads down,” Oliver hissed. His nerves were fraying, but luckily, the vampires were busy, and zombies, as a rule, weren’t worth noticing.
Oliver kept his gaze ahead, yet every now and then he was drawn to passing faces. Some looked down with disdain at his smelly companions, scowling at Oliver for being in such company. Yet others seemed to only look at Oliver. One woman’s face lit with recognition, but Oliver didn’t think he’d ever seen her before. Once, a man tugged
his friend’s jacket and pointed in Oliver’s direction as they passed. He didn’t know why anyone would recognize him and he didn’t think this had ever happened before. Then again, he’d never been watching nervously to see if people noticed him. It was possible that they thought he was wealthy, and the zombies were his servants, though not
really wealthy, because zombies, as a rule, weren’t very reliable. But there had been that old man at the doctor’s office who recognized him as well….

These moments of attention were making him too nervous. Emalie and Dean really had no idea what Oliver had gotten them into. Since they entered the center, he’d been trying to figure out
how he would get them out if they were discovered. He had yet to come up with a solution.

They passed through a wide space in the crowd by the food court. Emalie strayed hard as she eyed the restaurants: There were fast-food stops, like Berthold’s, which served many varieties of insects and small creatures in suspension; Xanadu’s, with
its thirty-seven different animal flavors of blood sorbet; a trendy shish kebab place called All Things Rodent; and the smoky, torch-lit booths of L’organo Sanguinante, where families and couples sat for fine dining. Oliver sped up, and as he did so, he heard a strange clicking sound in the din. It distracted him momentarily, as he tried to place the sound.
Now they reached the first gap in the floors. Oliver quickly pulled Emalie and Dean to the wall. Kids spidered around them, climbing up and down. “Grab my shoulders,” he said, placing his hands against the rock wall, “and don’t let go.”

“This is so not good,” Dean said, shaking.

“Just grab him,” Emalie ordered. She locked her
elbow around Oliver’s upper arm. Oliver stepped up onto the wall. His foot slipped, and he wobbled for a moment. This was a lot of weight, a lot of concentration.

“Dude, dude, dude,” Dean whispered nervously.

“Tsss!” Oliver hissed icily. Dean managed to stop speaking, but his heavy breathing was relentless in Oliver’s ear.
He stepped to the right, then slowly scaled down the wall. The shoulders and bags of passing vampires brushed Emalie and Dean. Their grips tightened. Oliver focused only on his hands and the wall, until he felt the floor of the third level against his feet.

They rejoined the crowds and walked another minute, until they reached their destination. A sign in
understated neon script read:

Dead Désirée’s Drug & Alchemy Emporium

Oliver quickly led them inside.
AS OLIVER AND HIS ZOMBIE imposters stepped through a revolving glass door, they found themselves in a stark, brightly lit store. Neat rows of orderly shelves stretched away from them. As the door slid shut, it extinguished all
the hustling, bustling sounds of the center, leaving them in near silence. Tinny music drifted distantly from speakers in the ceiling. It sounded human: a mellow bossa nova. The store was very still. A pale, almost color-less magmalight gleamed from long tubes in the ceiling. The entire store seemed washed in white so bright that it made Oliver
squint, and yet, a dark, grimy green lingered in the corners and shadows. The air was humid and tinged with a strong smell of ammonia, like the floors had just been cleaned.

Oliver led them down the center aisle. The floor looked tiled, but their footsteps made no sound. They passed among rows of black glass bottles and small wooden boxes.
Everything was marked in white Skrit labels, what they contained a mystery for the most part, even to Oliver.

“‘This place doesn’t seem very vampirelike,’” Dean whispered.

“‘Désirée’s not a vampire,’” said Oliver over his shoulder.

“‘Then what is she?’”

“‘Something more dangerous.’”
“W...well can you be more specific?”

Oliver shrugged.

“Nobody really knows what she is.”

“But—”

“Tsss.”

They’d reached the end of the aisle, and found themselves at a high counter. A narrow woman in a pristine white lab coat stood with her back to them. Her crimson
hair was tied back in a bun. “Just a moment,” she said before Oliver had a chance to speak. She stood perfectly still, gazing into a diamond-shaped mirror with a frame made of jade. Oliver was too low to see any reflection of her in it, seeing instead only the glowing white ceiling lights.

He took the opportunity to turn quickly to Emalie and
Dean. He tried to show them in a single glance that here there was even more danger than in the crowd they’d just left. He should have given them more of a warning about Désirée, but it was too late now.

“Now then, how can I help you, Oliver?”

Oliver turned back to find Désirée looking down at him pleasantly. Her face was
plaster white. She wore thin glasses. On first glance, she looked delicate and pretty. Oliver was surprised that she knew his name, but then reminded himself that he shouldn’t have been. Désirée was known to have sight. There was much debate as to what Désirée actually was, but no one questioned it too much, mostly because it was rumored that Désirée didn’t
appreciate such questions, and as nearly everyone needed something from her, no one wanted to upset her.

Now she looked over Oliver’s hooded companions. When her eyes moved back to Oliver, they seemed to gleam with understanding. Still, all she did was smile. “A photo experiment, is it?”

Oliver found that his throat was tight. “That’s
right.”

“I thought your parents told you not to play with cameras?” Her smile broadened and, as it did, Oliver noticed something odd about Désirée’s face. It seemed like when she moved, it took her skin a second to catch up. In fact, it was almost as if her real face was beneath this white plaster front, moving on its own, and
that the face they could see was only a mask that could barely keep up. Oliver felt like behind Désirée’s pleasant smile, there was a wider grin, with darker teeth. Like behind her mild lavender eyes, there was perhaps a different set of eyes entirely.

“Yes, they told me that,” Oliver answered. He figured it was no use lying to her.

“And yet you want to
develop this photo anyway? Interesting,” Désirée purred. “Curious about what remains out of focus, aren’t you?” “I… I just want to see it.” “Is that all?” Désirée’s head swiveled slightly, and lumps seemed to move beneath her mask, as if whatever was below was rolling about, enjoying the lies. “Wouldn’t you say that you’re looking for a bit more
than that?”

Oliver shrugged. “Sure. I...I guess.”

“Well, good.” Désirée nodded. “I, for one, think it would have been best for you to know long before now.”

“Know what?” Oliver asked.

Désirée’s face slowly lost its smile. “What you want to find out.” Before Oliver could reply, she spun around and
stalked off into the shelves of medicines. “I have just the thing, of course.”

“She’s not normal,” Dean muttered.

“Tssss,” Oliver hissed. Suddenly, he heard that muted clicking sound again, and here in the quiet of Désirée’s, he recognized what it was. He turned, and out of the corner of his eye, saw Emalie holding open her
jacket ever-so-slightly—
Oliver spun and caught her hand before she could snap another photo with her camera, which she had hanging around her neck.

“Don’t,” Oliver said icily. “No more.”
Emalie’s face drained. “I __

“You’ll get yourself killed.”
Emalie slid her jacket
closed, face pale. “I wouldn’t have gotten caught,” she muttered stubbornly.

“Now then…”

Oliver turned to find Désirée emerging from the shelves. Her smile took a moment to stretch back to life. She placed a black bottle on the table, labeled with a white rune. This Skrit had an odd-angled, diamond border. It indicated another world, yet
Oliver wasn’t sure which. He was pretty sure that diamonds meant higher worlds, yet the angles and lengths of sides were unique to each one, and his class hadn’t studied those yet.

Oliver found Désirée looking over his shoulder again. Her face had lost a little of its grin. “Interesting, Oliver, indeed. Found yourself an Orani, did you?”
“A what?” Oliver asked, though he thought he recognized the word.

“One who sees.” Désirée nodded toward Emalie. “Though she doesn’t know it, yet.” Désirée looked back to Oliver. “I guess you’re no stranger to taking risks.”

“What do you mean?” Oliver asked.

Désirée’s grin returned in full, the skin stretching tight,
but she didn’t answer. Instead, she opened the black bottle and tapped one drop onto her finger. It was a silver liquid, thick like glue, yet it immediately began to dissolve into the air.

“You’ll want to apply this to the negative before you print the photo,” Désirée explained. “It will correct for the error. And make sure your—friends—wear gloves.”
Oliver nodded. “But what do you mean *error*?”

“Human film reacts when it’s exposed to light,” Désirée said smoothly. “Humans then develop the film so that they can see the visible light spectrum. There are, of course, other spectra that humans know nothing about and would never know to develop. This tincture will bring out those spectra.”
“So this is what a vampire would use to develop their photo?”

Désirée’s smile broadened more than ever. “Why, Oliver, no. This is what you need to develop your photo.”

“W...what?”

“You’ll understand soon enough, won’t you? Now...”

Désirée slid the bottle toward him, then reached into her
pocket. “I have one more thing for you.” She produced a large crimson crystal, diamond-shaped with a silver border, and hanging from a chain.

“What’s that?”

Désirée held it out to him. “Just an amulet of Ephyra, for protection. Maybe you’ve realized by now that you’re entering into a more dangerous world.” Her eyes
flashed over his shoulder again. “I would advise you to wear this at all times.”

Oliver took the amulet. The crimson crystal didn’t sparkle or shine, but instead seemed to absorb the light. There was the faintest burning glow from its center.

“Around your neck, dear,” Désirée offered with grandmotherly concern. Oliver slipped the chain over
his head. “Now run along, before the hour gets too early.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Oliver reached into his pocket. “How much for this?”

“Five for the tincture,” Désirée replied. “The amulet is my gift to you.”

“All right.” Oliver slapped a five-myna square on the counter, then turned to leave.
“Oliver.” He found Désirée with her hands out in front of her, fingers touching. “I do hope you’ll come again if you need to.”

“Okay,” Oliver said. “Because you’ll need to.”

Désirée grinned.

Oliver headed out faster then they’d come in. His thoughts were spinning, but more than anything, he just wanted to get out of
Désirée’s. He led the way through the revolving door, into the bustling crowd. They made their way back to the gap and up the wall, no one speaking. They were passing the food court, when Emalie stopped again, pulling Oliver’s sweatshirt, and causing Dean to bump into the two of them. Oliver spun to find Emalie pulling out her camera.
“Stop it,” he muttered, squeezing her arm.

Emalie winced, but shot him a defiant look. “Come on! We’re almost home free. There’s nothing wrong with __”

“Oliver!”

Oliver froze. He looked out across the food court. There, standing up from a table, was Theo. Sitting on either side of him were Brent
and Maggots, all with full baskets from Berthold’s.

Now Theo’s face narrowed with suspicion. “What’s up, buddy?” he called.

Oliver turned, grabbed Emalie and Dean by their sleeves, and started into the crowd. From behind him, he heard Theo announce, “He’s gone from cows to zombies.”
shoulder, but his view of Theo was obscured by the throng.

“Come on! Hurry!” he urged, dragging Emalie and Dean toward the exit doors. He glanced over his shoulder again—

And bumped right into Theo. “What’s up, Ollie?” Theo asked.

Oliver looked around, panicking, as Brent and
Maggots flanked them on either side.
OLIVER FELT LIKE HIS universe had shrunk to a small bubble, its walls formed by the crowd pulsing by on either side. He stood in the space between with his vampire classmates in front of him, and behind him were his—what? What
were Emalie and Dean? Conspirators? Friends, like Désirée had said? But it really didn’t matter, did it? All that mattered was that they were human.

“What are you doing here with them?” Theo nodded to what he thought were zombies. Emalie and Dean kept their heads down, faces hidden by their hoods. Emalie gripped the back of Oliver’s
sweatshirt.

Oliver didn’t know how to answer. “Get out of my way, guys,” he said, and tried to step through them—

But Brent and Maggots fell in tight on either side of Theo. “No,” Theo said simply. “Not until you explain why you’re walking around with a couple of smelly zombies.”

“Gross,” said Maggots,
sniffing the air in an exaggerated fashion. His brow scrunched quizzically, and he scratched at his head.

“I don’t have to explain,” Oliver muttered, trying to sound tough, but his insides were screaming. “Why don’t you guys go annoy someone else?”

“Ha,” Theo smirked, “actually, Oliver, you’re the one who’s annoying. I guess
you didn’t hear.” His eyes flashed. “Wait, I get it. These are your new friends. That makes sense. Why didn’t I see it coming? First, you’re getting your picture taken by a—”

“Human,” Maggots mumbled.

“Yeah,” Theo continued, “And now—”

“No.” Maggots nudged Theo hard in the arm.
“Humans.”

“What do you mean?” Brent asked.

“What…” Theo sniffed the air.

Oliver watched, helpless. He had to get out of here. But they’d never make it back to the sewers, and even if they did, Emalie and Dean weren’t fast enough, not even close.

“Oh, no way!” Theo’s face stretched in an amazed
smile, and his eyes momentarily glowed pale blue. He looked triumphantly at Oliver. “Wow, Oliver. You’re in so much trouble.”

“What?” Brent almost whined.

“Duh,” Maggots elbowed him, then pointed past Oliver. “Humans,” he muttered.

Just the word caused a passing woman to turn in shock, shaking her head as if
questioning what she’d just heard. She kept walking, but Theo had seen her pause. Now he raised his arm.

“Don’t,” Oliver said miserably, “Theo—”

“Humans!” Theo called. He didn’t sound malicious, like they were just a couple of kids messing around or playing a joke; he sounded like he was stating an important, disturbing fact.
“Humans!” he called again.

The entire crowd began to slow and turn, and immediately, others picked out the scent. Oliver knew the zombie jackets were strong enough if you weren’t looking for humans, but if you were.…

Now Maggots joined Theo. “Humans!” They announced together.

“Impossible,” an adult
said amid the grumbling crowd. Suddenly, someone snatched the hood off of Emalie’s head.

A gasp seemed to silence the entire Underground. Dean’s hood was pulled off as well. Everyone was coming to a stop, bumping into one another as they turned their heads.

Oliver watched it all happening, and knew there
was nothing he could say, nothing he could do, except.....

He grabbed Emalie and Dean by their arms and slammed sideways through the stopping confusion of people. “Hold on to me!” he shouted. They were both too scared to reply, but he felt them grip his shoulders as he burst through the surprised crowd, vaulted onto the stone
railing, then leaped into the chasm.

There was a chorus of shocked and surprised voices, but it was quickly drowned out by the rush of air. They sailed down from the top floor, and in moments, Oliver knew that there was no way he could control their fall. He concentrated hard, trying to hold on to the forces. It was no use. His grip was already
slipping. They were picking up speed—

But he could maneuver them a little, and so he arced toward the nearest levitating vampire, slamming into him in midair.

“What the—” the older gentleman grunted.

For a moment, they became a tangle of four bodies, but then the adult righted himself and the
group’s fall slowed. Oliver was hanging on to the man’s shoulder, with Emalie and Dean hanging on to both of his. The man eyed Oliver and the humans with confusion, but then his face began to darken demonically.

“What do we have here?” He clawed at the humans.

But Oliver was already vaulting away, pushing hard off the man. They sailed
upward for a moment, then began to fall again, plunging down two more levels, and landing on a large woman who was floating serenely, a raven perched on her shoulder.

“What!?” she bellowed. The raven flapped free of her shoulder, and the foursome careened into the torrent of falling water in the center of the chasm. They were
immediately soaked and wrapped in the water’s roar. The woman’s hat was lost, and her gray hair matted down over her snarling face. “How dare you!” This woman was very strong. Despite their tangle and the force of the water, Oliver could feel her holding the group’s descent at a reasonable speed. Now she somehow got a hand free and
reached wildly for Dean. “Twisted boy!” the woman scolded, water rolling down her bloated face. “But I’ll take the snack!” Her nails raked across his arm.

“Ahh!” Dean shouted.

Oliver struggled to keep her at bay, while at the same time trying to get his feet onto her to lunge away. He ended up kicking her hard in the stomach.
“Bah!” the woman groaned. “You’re a miserable excuse for our kind!”

Their tangle of bodies flew free of the waterfall. Oliver was just getting righted when he felt a searing pain in his shoulder. “Gah!” The raven was already flying away, having left a deep puncture in Oliver’s shoulder. He could hear it clucking as it circled...
around for more.

“I’m going to—” the woman started.

But Oliver finally planted his feet and launched them away with all the strength he could muster. They arced across the chasm. In a dizzying blur, Oliver saw the lowest levels of the Underground and the deep crimson glow from below. They were entering the steam
clouds now. If this jump didn’t work…

Suddenly, they were tumbling onto hard rock. Oliver found himself on his back, staring up at the underside of the lowest platform of the Underground. He could see heads peering over the edges of the railings in different spots, but he could also see others levitating across the chasm,
business as usual.

Oliver sat up and saw that they were on a carved stone ledge. Steam clouds crawled along the walls. A cave led into darkness behind them.

“Uh,” Emalie groaned. She got to her knees and rubbed at her arm.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she said, but as she moved her arm up and
down she grimaced. Then she opened her zombie coat—to find her camera broken. The lens was cracked, and film was spilling out of the back. “It was my mom’s,” she said with a sigh.

“I’m sorry,” said Oliver.

Emalie gazed up the chasm. “What would have happened to us up there?”

Oliver stood up, brushing himself off. “You don’t want
to know.” He checked his pocket and was relieved to find the glass bottle intact. “We need to get out of here.”

Emalie stood. She looked at him severely.

“I shouldn’t have brought you down here,” Oliver said.

“No.” Emalie shook her head. “It would have been my fault, if—” She shook a little, and now started crying quietly.
Oliver had no idea what to do. Crying wasn’t something that he’d ever had to deal with before. He’d been taught that it was something that only weak creatures with souls did.

“I made you bring us, I—” Emalie balled her hands into tight fists, staring at the ground. She held her breath for a long minute, then shook it off.
Oliver waited a second.

“We should go,” he said again.

Emalie nodded.

“Whoa.” Dean was standing at the edge of the ledge, looking down. Oliver and Emalie joined him.

The chasm still dropped into darkness, but the red glow was more apparent. Bare rock walls dropped another hundred feet, and
then there were more ledges. The view was obscured by steam, but they could just make out more caves leading away from the chasm, lit by red and lavender lights, and hear the din of much activity. The sound was different than in the mall above. This was rougher somehow, darker. There was the harsh clinking of metal. The rumble of primitive machinery, the echo
of a deep drum...

“That’s the Yomi?” Dean whispered.

“Yeah,” Oliver said quietly.

Now a particularly loud crash, and the whine of tinny music.

“W...what’s it like?” Dean asked.

“It’s pretty Old World,” Oliver said. “Kind of lawless. There are vampires who live
there and never come to the surface. Zombies and wraiths, too.” Oliver had never been to the Yomi. The thought of it actually made him a bit nervous. Just being a vampire wasn’t enough to ensure safety down there. “Come on,” he said.

They walked away from the ledge and headed into the cavern. A low rock ceiling arced over them. The dark
space widened, and a pale yellow light increased. They reached a cobblestone walkway and followed it.

“Put your hoods back up,” Oliver instructed. Emalie and Dean quickly did so. They emerged from darkness onto what looked like a subway train platform. Its walls blinked with flashing video screens that were so thin they hung like cloth. Beside the
platform was a large, clear tube. Vampires stood about, alone and in families, waiting patiently, some with luggage at their sides.

Oliver led them quickly along the platform, weaving in and out of the throng, who were eyeing the tube expectantly. Now, the floor and walls began to shake. “Ow,” Dean whispered. Oliver could feel it, too. The
pressure was changing, lowering, making his ears ache.

“A charion is coming,” Oliver said.

There was a rush of air and a low humming sound, so low that it vibrated their teeth. Oliver paused and steadied his balance. A blast of air overwhelmed the tunnel, and the clear tube shook. A cylindrical train
shot into the station, halting immediately, creating a wicked backdraft of air. The humming quickly cycled down to silence. Segments of the clear tube slid open. The charion was black, and smoking. Large, glowing embers, still smoldering, tumbled down its sides. Massive fans rumbled to life in the station, sucking up the dark smoke and ash that
billowed from the train.

“That train goes to the Underworld?” Dean whispered.

The charion doors slid open, and the trio just caught a glimpse of the plush, low-lit interior before passengers started crowding off and on. There were deep seats and long plasma screens showing advertisements and views of the towering spires of far-off
Underworld cities. Gentle string music hummed lightly. Above each seat hung a network of red tubing, with brass valves at the end. The valves were numbered and corresponded to a menu etched on the arm of each seat.

Oliver led them along the wall of the platform, blending in with the people heading off the train and up a long
hallway.

“What are—”

“Tsss.” Oliver silenced Dean. There was no time for explanations right now, especially about those red dining tubes. Still, it was all Oliver could do to keep them moving. He loved the charions and loved traveling, maybe more than anything else. He didn’t really care where the train was going,
just that it was going, with the world passing by outside. I should just get on right now, he thought wildly. Take Emalie and Dean and just go somewhere where they wouldn’t be in danger. Except it was fifteen hours to New York City, twenty hours to Shanghai. In that amount of time, his disappearance would easily be discovered. At least, we’d have those
fifteen hours, he thought glumly. Given what had just happened in the center, his existence might be over as soon as he got home.

They walked up a curving tunnel, then entered an enormous central station. Vampires streamed in and out of tunnels to charions heading in all directions, stood in lines to purchase tickets from antique booths, and crowded
around standing tables at a café in the center of the station.

“Wow,” Emalie breathed, daring to gaze up at the dizzyingly high dome ceiling. On it was a dazzling route map. Magmalight lines connected brilliant gold etchings of surface and Underworld cities around the world.

Oliver didn’t pause to
explain any of it. He pressed forward, across the cavernous room and straight toward a row of gold elevator doors. These went express to and from the surface. Doors slid open and closed, vampires crowding on and off as bells sounded.

Oliver hung back, waiting for the timing to provide a fairly empty elevator car, and then ushered the humans in.
The elevator shot up with another earsplitting pressure change. Moments later, they were disembarking in an abandoned Seattle bus tunnel. It was cold, damp, and colorless, save for a few bare lightbulbs. Oliver led them up two nonworking escalators, then a set of crumbling stairs, and finally out through an iron gate.

They were back
downtown, just like that, among the human holiday shoppers going about their evening. Oliver was relieved to be back on the surface, and yet.... He wondered if he’d just walked away from his only chance to escape.

“You should get back,” he said, taking their zombie coats.

They both seemed to come out of a trance. Dean
checked his watch. “Okay, right. Yeah, we’re a couple of minutes late—not bad. My parents should still be over at the Santa photos with my brother and sister,” he said, then added glumly, “guess I shouldn’t spoil it for them.”

Emalie looked seriously at Oliver. “What are you going to do?”

Oliver wasn’t sure. He hadn’t thought that far ahead.
Now that he did, he realized that what had just happened may well have already gotten back to his parents. The vampire community wasn’t that big, and a story about a vampire child taking humans into the Underground would spread fast. Anyone who knew his parents would feel obligated to tell them. “I don’t know,” he said. “I think I’m going to be in trouble.”
Trouble wasn’t the half of it. He had no idea how his parents and brother were going to react. Not to mention what was going to happen in school on Monday.

Emalie seemed to read his thoughts. “We should try to develop the photo tonight. Before—”

“Yeah,” Oliver agreed. If they didn’t do it now, he might never have the chance.
Emalie turned purposefully to Dean. Oliver was impressed that her decisive self had returned so quickly. “Dean, we’ll ask your parents if you can sleep over.”

“Right,” Dean said with a sigh, like he didn’t have the energy to protest. “Come over after midnight,” Emalie said to Oliver.
Oliver nodded. “See you there.”

“Emalie, let’s go,” urged Dean, and pulled her into the crowd.

Oliver stepped back into the shadows on the side of the building, spectralized, then climbed up the wall into darkness. He moved to the edge of the building and watched as Emalie and Dean bobbed away through the
crowd, safe in the world of cheery holiday light. He almost wished he could go with them. Because going home was not an option. Whatever might be waiting for him there, he at least wanted to finish this business with the photograph before he took his punishment.

Emalie and Dean disappeared into the blur of people. Oliver retreated into
the shadows, to kill time alone, until later in the night.
Chapter 11

A Memory Revealed

OLIVER MADE HIS WAY across town, staying out of the sewers and avoiding popular vampire spots like the stone troll, the roller coaster at Seattle Center, or any of the
parks and ball fields. He hadn’t told his parents where he would be all evening. Since it was a Saturday, he didn’t need to, but Phlox probably expected him home for lunch around midnight. And missing that wouldn’t really be a big deal, unless of course his parents knew about the incident at the Underground. If they did, then they might even be out
looking for him now. He kept under the trees, wary of bats or owls that might be occupied. And if his parents somehow didn’t know, then he’d still need to be home by dinner, but not before.

As he walked along, Oliver took a moment to gaze at the amulet around his neck. So far, it had not seemed to provide any protection. Of course, Désirée hadn’t
mentioned what kind of protection it offered. And who exactly did he need protection from? *I need protection from myself,* thought Oliver darkly. After all, he was the one who’d gotten his photo taken in the first place, who brought humans into the Underground.

Just after midnight, he headed for Emalie’s house.
The upstairs was silent, the basement dark. Oliver circled around to the basement door and silently let himself inside. He weaved through the boxes, but paused just before he reached Emalie’s darkroom space.

“I’m here,” Oliver murmured.

“Wha!” There was a thud as Dean’s head hit a shelf. “Shhhhh!” Emalie hissed.
The red light flicked on. Emalie was getting up from a sleeping bag that had been laid out on the floor. Dean was rubbing his head. “Man, you’re quiet,” he muttered, still eyeing Oliver with a bit of mistrust.

“Come on,” Emalie said seriously. “Before my dad wakes up. Not that he will.”

“I think he’s down for the count,” Dean offered. He
sounded like he was trying to be sympathetic. Oliver watched Emalie for a reaction, but she didn’t have one.

Oliver stepped beside her at the counter by the sink. Dean peered over their shoulders. Oliver produced the slim black bottle. The cap had a dropper, which Oliver squeezed as he lifted it off. Emalie held the negative
between her fingers.

“You see the spot?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah.” Oliver squeezed a tiny drop of the shimmering silver liquid onto the blurry form in the right side of the negative. There was a slight hiss of steam as the liquid seemed to evaporate. In a moment, it was gone. The negative looked the same.

“That’s it?” Dean asked.
“I think so.” Oliver shrugged.

“Let’s see if it worked,” Emalie said, and slid the negative into the top of the enlarger. A metal arm held the negative beneath a lightbulb, suspended over a white surface, where Emalie placed a blank sheet of photo paper. She flicked a switch, sending a beam of normal light through the negative and
onto the paper. After a moment, she turned it off, then moved the paper into the sink, dropping it into the first tray of liquid.

The three bent over the sink. Outlines of the abandoned room began to appear. The fine diamond shapes of the chandelier seemed to sketch themselves into existence...and now in the area where Oliver should
have been, the outline of a figure began to emerge. Oliver could see the vaguest impression of a face. Inside, he started to sag. After all this, he was about to simply see a photo of himself.

But then that area of the photo began to glow instead of darken. Silver light burst from the page.

“Um,” Emalie began. Oliver glanced at her, but she
wasn’t looking at the photo; she had turned toward him.

Now Oliver sensed it, too. Crimson light. He looked down. A deep glow was brightening inside his sweatshirt. Oliver reached inside and produced the amulet of Ephyra. The crystal was burning from within, the light growing brighter and brighter.

“Guys, the photo,” Dean
said hoarsely.

Silver light was rising from the paper where Oliver should have been, creating a swirling beam shooting straight up out of the liquid. The entire room was being lit in silver now, but also in crimson, as the amulet grew brighter as well.

“What’s happening?” Dean asked, his voice shaking.
There was a sound of rushing wind. The silver and crimson lights became so bright that details of the room began to wash away. Oliver looked back at the photo, and, as he did so, there was a blinding flash. He lost track of sight, sound—of the entire world around him.

*The next thing he saw was darkness, spotted with lights.*
Oliver tried to move, wondering how long he’d been knocked out, but he couldn’t seem to control his arms or legs. Now he could see that the lights were those of a Christmas tree, an enormous one. There were the sides of buildings and the night sky. He was looking up and moving. The Christmas tree was passing by. Then it stopped.
And she appeared. The teacher from that old chorus photo. Young, alive—human. Only she was dressed differently, wearing a wool coat with the collar upturned and a round fur hat. But it was her smile, above all else, that Oliver felt sure he recognized. She looked down at him tenderly. Her smile made him feel warm, safe. It was like nothing he’d ever felt.
before, and yet it seemed so familiar.

Now another face appeared, a man, gazing down at Oliver from behind the woman. He smiled slightly, then glanced around and checked his watch. His mouth moved like he was saying something to the woman, but there was still no sound. Now the woman spoke to Oliver. He couldn’t hear
what she said, though. Then she leaned in and kissed him. Mother, he thought with a warm certainty, but that didn’t make any sense.

The woman disappeared, and the world began to move again. The Christmas tree slid out of view. Raindrops began to hit his face. Oliver could feel them. Cold, biting sensations. His view stopped again, and the woman
appeared beside him. She was fiddling with an umbrella, but then she stopped. She was looking over her shoulder. Now Oliver saw the man rush by his view, looking confused. There was a commotion—

Then the world spun. The buildings and the Christmas tree turned sideways. Oliver was falling over. Bricks appeared beneath him, but then he was caught by hands.
And lifted. His mother’s face appeared again—

No, this was Phlox’s face. Wait, yes, that made sense. She was his mother. Here she was smiling at him with her same look of love—only Oliver felt different. He felt terrified. And there was Sebastian’s face as well, but what was on his lips? It was…

Phlox’s smile widened,
and now she leaned toward Oliver, as if to kiss him. Except then he felt a bright, searing pain.

Oliver’s world spun once more. There was a flash of pure white, and then Oliver found himself looking down on the scene he’d just been in: an overturned baby carriage; a woman, Phlox, crouched over a baby in her arms; Sebastian standing
beside her, hand on her shoulder; and the baby was screaming, but then not.

Its face became still. Its eyes slipped closed. For a moment, a faint veil of mist seemed to circle around it, then vanish.

Phlox stood, holding the unmoving baby, wrapped in a yellow blanket, only now with two red marks on its tiny neck. She handed the baby to
Sebastian, who tucked it carefully into his long coat. They shared an embrace, looking down at the tiny child with tender smiles, and then stole off into the night.

Oliver rose higher. The carriage was not far from the Christmas tree, and beneath its wide branches were two figures, the man and woman who’d brought him here, now lying on the pavement,
unmoving.

“Oh…” Oliver heard a voice say breathlessly.

He found Emalie floating beside him, also staring down at the scene. She was crying. Oliver looked back, but now he was rising faster, the Christmas tree shrinking, the buildings sliding past. The night started to fade into fog, its color draining as crimson light overwhelmed his
Oliver opened his eyes and saw the cobwebbed rafters of Emalie’s basement ceiling. A face appeared above him.

“Hey!” Dean reached down and shook Oliver by the shoulder. “What happened?”

“I—” Oliver started.

“What did you do?” Dean said accusingly.
“What?” Oliver said, sitting up and blinking hard. As he did so, Dean turned and lunged to his knees beside Emalie, who was also lying flat out on the floor.

“Emalie,” Dean urged, shaking her shoulder. “Come on, hey, come on!”

Suddenly, Emalie shuddered. “Gah!” She sat right up. “What happened?”

“It was that amulet!”
Dean said, pointing toward Oliver. “There was this flash of light and both of you collapsed. Then you were just lying there!”

Oliver looked down to find the amulet still around his neck, but the crystal was shattered, its shards spread across the floor.

“It wasn’t for protection,” Emalie said.

Oliver looked at her.
She’d been there with him, for sure. “No,” he agreed, feeling a deep ache inside.

“What are you talking about?” Dean asked, his head whipping back and forth between them.

“We saw something,” Emalie said carefully. She looked at Oliver to continue.

But Oliver wasn’t quite sure what to say. What had they just seen? You know, he
thought to himself, his anxiety flaring hotter than ever. *You know exactly what you saw.*

“*The amulet was a portal of some kind,*” Oliver said, holding the hollow casing in his hand. He’d heard and read about such things. *The alchemy involved in uncoupling from this world’s time continuum,* then traveling to a different
moment, was very advanced. “We saw the past,” Oliver continued. But it hadn’t been just that. He had also felt the past...been connected to it. Who could engineer a portal that powerful? Well, Désirée for one.

“What did you see?” Dean asked urgently.

“We saw—” Emalie started, but she caught herself and again waited for Oliver.
Just say it, he thought miserably. “It was my parents... My human parents.”

Emalie and Dean just looked at him. Oliver swallowed and pressed on. “We saw— They were killed by vampires, and—” Oliver couldn’t believe what he was saying—“and I was sired. I was human, and—they turned me...”

“But isn’t that how all
vampires are made?” asked Dean.

Oliver shook his head, staring at the floor. “Not anymore. Not for a long time. We’re all…they’re all created from their parents. It’s not even possible to sire a child. It’s not supposed to be, anyway.”

“But it happened to you,” Dean finished.

“Not necessarily,” Oliver
said. “I mean, the vision might have been a trick, a lie —”

“It was real,” Emalie said softly. “I could tell, I mean, I could feel that it really happened. You used to be human, Oliver. And your parents, they loved you, they…” Her eyes started to well up again.

Oliver was surprised by how much the vision had
affected Emalie. Come to think of it, he was surprised that she had been part of it at all. But Désirée had said that Emalie had *sight*, so at least one thing Désirée said seemed to be true.

And he agreed with Emalie, about the vision, too. As much as he wanted to believe that it might have been a trick, a lie of some kind, he knew it had been
real. In a way, for as confused as he now felt, he almost felt a little better. There was something wrong with him, and it wasn’t anything he’d done. He was different than everyone around him. He’d been lied to all his life.

How many people knew? But who cared? His parents knew, that was enough. Not only did they know, they had stolen him from his rightful
parents, his parents who had loved him, just like Emalie said. *But don’t my vampire parents love me now?* Yes, they did—but not enough to tell him the truth about his origin. Not enough to help him understand why he felt different, or tell him why he needed special doctor’s appointments.

Oliver sat on Emalie’s floor, the thoughts swirling.
He sensed Emalie standing up and turning to the sink, then sitting back down. When he looked over to her, she was holding up the photo. It was burned through, a gaping hole where the blur of Oliver had been.

“So,” Dean began, “I know I wasn’t in the vision, and all that”—he sounded hurt—“but what’s the problem? I mean, if you’re a
vampire, you’re not supposed to care if you were sired or made or what, right?”

“But my parents have been lying to me,” Oliver said. He explained what his parents had told him, which was the same as what everyone in the vampire world believed about kids. He also told them about the doctor’s visits.

Emalie seemed to be
thinking hard. “Is there anything else?” she asked. “I mean, you said you heard the doctor say that you’d been chosen for something, right? And that you’re being prepared for it?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Do you know anything else about what that could be?”

“No, but...there’s a file,” Oliver said, thinking it
through. “A file about my doctor’s visits that my dad has. And he’s supposed to show it to the people he works with.”

“It probably says something about what they’re doing to you,” Dean added.

“We should get it,” Emalie said. “Do you know where it would be?”

“He’d probably keep it in the filing cabinet in the
study,” Oliver guessed. He was about to say that he could look at it on his own, that once again, it would be far too dangerous to have Emalie and Dean involved. Yet he found that he wanted them to be there. Having Emalie see the portal vision had helped Oliver to believe that what he’d seen was true. He couldn’t do this alone, and Emalie and Dean were a part
of it all now.

“I’ll get word to you of when we can meet up to check my dad’s files,” Oliver said, then his voice fell. “Except I don’t know what’s going to happen when I get home tonight. If my parents know about the Underground, you might never even see me again.”

“Well,” Emalie said, “don’t let on that you know
anything, if you can. And we’ll, um, we’ll just hope we hear from you.”

The three of them sat silently for a moment. “I should go,” Oliver said, getting up and turning toward the door.

“Oliver.” Oliver turned back to find Emalie standing. “I’m really sorry about your parents.”

Oliver nodded. “Yeah.”
Then he disappeared into the darkness, not making a sound as he left.
Chapter 12

The Secret File

As Oliver wound up the spiral staircase toward the kitchen, he could hear silverware and goblets clinking on the table. He walked slowly.

Either they knew, or they didn’t.

He passed through the
empty kitchen toward the dining room. Now he heard quiet conversation between Phlox and Sebastian.

“"We received the invitation today. I think it will be nice,"" Phlox was saying.

“What time?” Sebastian asked.

Oliver paused at the entrance to the dining room. He could see Sebastian’s back. Phlox was to his left.
Bane was slouched at the far end of the table. Across from Phlox was an empty chair for Oliver. He thought about turning around and taking off. How could he just sit down and pretend that this was his family? *It is my family,* he thought. But it hadn’t always been. *Doesn’t matter, it’s the only family I have now.* This thought didn’t make Oliver feel any better. Maybe he
would just skip dinner—

“Hey, Ollie.” Phlox was looking up…and smiling. “We were wondering when you’d show up.” Sebastian turned with a half-smile. Bane didn’t bother looking up. So far, everything was normal, which gave Oliver no choice but to sit down.

“What were you up to tonight?” Sebastian asked as Oliver pulled his chair up to
the table.

“Nothing,” Oliver said, head down.

Bane snorted to himself.

“Charles,” Phlox warned.

Oliver glanced at him, his nerves sizzling. Bane kept his eyes on his plate.

Phlox passed a deep baking dish to Oliver. “So…” she began as Oliver scooped layer cake onto his plate. Oliver tried to keep his hand
from shaking.

Here it comes, he thought.

“Anything interesting to report from your Saturday?”

Oliver put down the dish and grabbed his fork. “Nah,” he said, and started eating. Inside though, he was just waiting.

But one bite, then another, and no one said anything. A minute passed and Oliver finally looked up
—to find the rest of them just eating. Oliver wanted to scream, *Do you know or not?* Finally, Sebastian looked to Oliver, “So, any new dreams lately?” He smiled.

“Um—” The scene from the portal vision ran across his mind. “I think I had another one,” Oliver lied, “but I don’t remember it.”

“Oh, Oliver,” Phlox began matter-of-factly, “we
were just talking. Your father’s Longest Night office party is next Friday. You’re welcome to have friends over while we’re out, if you want. Maybe you could invite Seth?”

“Maybe,” Oliver mumbled.

“He might be excited to get out,” continued Phlox. “Francyne and Edward just picked up their new baby.
She’s such a precious little thing,” Phlox said to herself, then added, “but I’m sure their house has been crazy with the new arrival.”

Oliver just shrugged. A real vampire child. That must have been nice.

“Or,” Phlox tried, “you could invite other friends, if you want.”

Oliver almost laughed out loud. Sure! Imagine that:
Actually, Mom, that sounds great! I’ve got two friends I’d like to have over. You don’t mind that they’re humans, do you? Instead, he said, “Okay.”

“And then Saturday,” Phlox continued, “we’re having David and Elanor and your cousins over for Longest Night dinner and gifts.”

“Okay,” Oliver said again.
There was another moment of silent eating... then another... and then dinner was over. Bane went out for the late night without a word. Phlox retreated to the kitchen, Sebastian to his study.

Oliver was left sitting there, finishing up and having a hard time believing his luck. Did they really not know what had happened?
Well, they might still find out, so he wasn’t out of this yet. But with every day that passed, the chances would get smaller that his parents would find out about the Underground. And if he could make it to Friday, then he might just be able to get the file.

Oliver’s days seemed more sleepless than ever, yet he
almost preferred lying awake, because when he did fall asleep, he was plagued by the vision of his human parents. Incredibly, Sunday passed without any discovery of what had happened in the Underground, which made Oliver breathe easier, but there was still Monday at school to contend with.

He dragged out getting ready, partially because he
was so tired. As he and Bane walked up the rainy streets, Oliver kept lagging behind. His backpack felt extra heavy. When they neared the bridge underpass and its troll statue, Bane actually stopped and waited for Oliver to catch up.

Oliver glanced at him, waiting for a taunt. But then Bane said something completely different, “You
wanna ditch tonight?”

“Huh?” Oliver tensed inside. It was that strange, brotherly version of Bane again, the one that made Oliver feel nervous, like he was waiting for the punch line.

But as Bane fell into slow step beside him, there didn’t seem to be one. “Ty and Randall and I are going to head downtown, see what we
can find,” Bane explained. “You could come with us.”

“I—”

“Come on, bro.” He actually slapped Oliver’s back as he said this. “We’ll work some of that lamb out of you.”

Oliver didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t believe that Bane was actually inviting him along, yet alarms were going off inside. Could
he trust Bane? *Is he even my real brother?* If anything, Oliver wanted to spend as much time as he could this week *not* being around his family. “I…I shouldn’t,” he said finally. “I have a test, I __”

“Bane-o!” A voice shouted from nearby. They had reached the troll. Ty’s and Randall’s eyes lit up the dark behind it.
“What’s up?” Bane called. Then he put his hands on Oliver’s shoulders. This was weird, too. And so was what he said next, “You sure?”

Oliver kind of wondered why Bane was giving him the choice. Usually, if Bane wanted Oliver to do something, he just forced him to do it. What was going on with him? And yet, Oliver’s
old thought about Bane returned. *He knows. He still might not know exactly what’s going on, but he definitely knows there’s something.* Oliver shrugged. “I… I should just go to school.”

“Bane! Let’s go!” Ty shouted.

Bane looked directly at Oliver, and his gaze seemed almost apologetic. “All
right,” he said, sighing. He actually seemed disappointed.

“Is the twerp coming, or what?” Randall called.

Bane gave Oliver a halfhearted shove down the street, then turned to his friends. “The lamb has to run off to school!” he called sarcastically, then disappeared into the shadows.

Oliver continued slowly toward school. The whole
way, he thought about ditching on his own. Even as he trudged up the stairs toward class, he still considered turning and getting out of there. But that would only draw more suspicion, and then his teachers might call his parents. Still, his insides knotted as he stepped through the classroom door. *Here it comes*, he thought miserably.
Surely, thanks to Theo, everybody knew, and he was going to get it....

There was most of the class, carousing on the walls or in groups sitting on desks. Suzyn saw him first, then her friends, and one by one everyone stopped talking and turned toward Oliver. The room became silent except for Oliver’s footsteps across the tile floor. He glanced up,
finding Theo, Brent, and Maggots on the wall. They watched him, Theo grinning maliciously. Oliver looked down and rushed to his desk. As he slid into his seat, conversation seeped back into the room.

Oliver looked to Seth beside him. “Hey,” he said softly.

Seth was dealing his role-playing cards. He didn’t
“Seth,” Oliver murmured. “Don’t,” Seth whispered out of the corner of his mouth. “Don’t do this to me.” “I heard about your new sister—”

But Seth gathered his cards together and slid out of his seat. Oliver sat there, the chaos of the classroom echoing around him, and he couldn’t have felt more alone.
As the night went on, snickers bled into the silent treatment, but otherwise, no one talked to Oliver. It stopped bothering him after a couple of hours, and he started feeling defiant about it. What did they know anyway? They were all normal. They couldn’t understand what it was like to be him. So, fine, whatever. Still, the night took forever to
Oliver lagged behind as everyone left, then headed down the first-floor hall to Emalie’s classroom. He weaved between the lines of desks to Emalie’s seat, which wasn’t hard for a vampire nose to pick out. He pulled a note from his pocket:

Friday night. Outside my house. 3 AM? —o
He folded it tight and wedged it between the underside of the desktop and one of the metal bars.

That morning at dinner was the same. As was Tuesday night at school. Oliver visited Emalie’s desk before heading home, to find a return note:

c ya then. —e
He kept the paper. Wednesday passed normally. It was actually starting to seem like Oliver had gotten extremely lucky. Still, how could it be that every kid at school knew, yet word of the incident at the Underground had not gotten back to his parents? Oliver didn’t get it.

Thursday at school was the same as the rest of the
week. Oliver was getting used to being ignored when he bothered to notice. His thoughts were on Friday, on the file. When he got home, Sebastian called to say he would be at work until dawn. Phlox left shortly after dinner for a school board meeting. Bane camped out in the living room, playing videogames online with Ty and Randall.

Oliver had spread out his
homework on the kitchen island. But he wasn’t doing any of it. What was the point? He couldn’t pay attention to anything, at least not until he’d looked at that file. He kept thinking about Friday night, and it occurred to him that since it was incredibly risky to have Emalie and Dean over, he ought to make sure that the file was even in the drawer for them to see.
And with Bane locked into his game, and his parents out....

Oliver slipped out of the kitchen. He passed the living room and dining room, heading down the hall and into the dark study.

There was a wide antique desk that Sebastian had inherited from the Ming dynasty, with a thin, obsidian glass computer monitor on
top. Oliver slid into the leather desk chair, his eyes drawn to the small charcoal sketch of the family beside the monitor. It was from ten years ago. Everyone was gazing with pleasant seriousness, like things couldn’t be more normal. Oliver turned away.

The file drawer was in the bottom right corner of the desk. It had no lock. He
reached down to slide it open, but whacked the keyboard tray as he did so. The computer monitor jumped to life in blue light. Oliver froze, listening.

“No way!” he heard Bane shouting at his game, down the hall.

Oliver bent back down and slid open the file drawer. Phlox kept the files well organized. Oliver scanned the
titles on the folders. He wasn’t sure where it would be, but he saw medical records and pulled it out. The file was thin. There were bills for a few tooth regenerations, and for the couple of times that Oliver or Bane had broken a limb badly enough to need it splinted overnight, but nothing else.

He slid the file back and kept looking at the folder
names. They were normal, mundane things, and if Oliver’s information was disguised in one of those, it would take him far too long to find. But then, near the back, he saw a file with a title unlike all the others:

NEXIA

Oliver wasn’t sure what that word meant, but he felt like he’d heard it somewhere. In
school, maybe? The ending -xia was sometimes used in the names of higher worlds. He reached for the folder.

A green force field shimmered into existence for a moment, deflecting his hand. Oliver tried again with the same result. He tried to touch the folder in front of it and could. Same with the one behind it. That had to be the one. There had to be a way to
disable the force field somewhere: maybe a spoken password.

Oliver slid the drawer closed. Other than the computer, the desk was bare. He looked through the other drawers, but they were just full of office supplies. Maybe Sebastian had it somewhere on the computer. Oliver pulled out the keyboard. He called up a search window on
the screen, then typed in the folder name: nexia. The computer began to search. As it churned, Oliver turned his ear back to the door.

“Got one! Got one!” Bane shouted distantly. “Oh, yeeeaahh!”

Oliver looked back to the screen. The search window flashed: no results found. Now what? Well, he still had
until tomorrow night to find a way to disable the field. He started to leave when the computer beeped. A chat box had appeared.

There was a message from MAVincent42: *Seb, are you there? I’ve taken a look at these photos you sent. I think you’re right about him.*

*Just turn away,* Oliver thought...but instead he put his fingers to the keyboard
and replied: I’m here.

Dr. Vincent replied: You should bring him back in. Right away. Tell him the FRI results are faulty, and we need to run them again. My mistake.

Oliver thought about what to say, then typed: OK. Can you send me the photos? I lost them—computer crashed.

There was no reply…. And then: Loading them
now...

Oliver watched the chat box as a wheel spun. Now the corner of a large picture appeared in the tiny box. Oliver dragged the box bigger, until the first photo Dr. Vincent had sent filled the frame.

It took Oliver a moment to believe what he was seeing.

The photo was black and
white. It was a view of a room—the abandoned surface level of his house. There was Emalie standing on the floor, in the raincoat she’d worn on her very first visit. And there was the blur of Oliver on the ceiling. Oliver scrolled down. The second picture showed Emalie taking pictures, and a blurry presence hanging down behind her—when he’d tried to take her earring on
her third visit. He scrolled farther. The next picture showed Oliver’s blur by the window after Emalie had left.

The pictures had rounded edges and had been taken from high in the corner of the room. Closed-circuit cameras.... Of course, Sebastian would have had security features put in. *I’m an idiot*, Oliver thought, wincing. How could he not
have thought of that? Really, though, the only thing that mattered was—*they knew.*

His parents knew about Emalie. And they had known since the beginning.

Oliver kept scrolling and was hardly surprised by what he saw now. The next photo showed Oliver’s shadowy form leaping off the railing in the Underground, with Emalie and Dean on his back.
Who had taken it? Maybe some bystander who smelled a story? Someone his parents had hired? Did it matter?

Another message from Dr. Vincent appeared: Can you get him in tomorrow after work?

Oliver typed quickly: We have plans.

Dr. Vincent replied: Seb, I don’t think we can afford to wait.
Oliver was already getting up from the chair as he typed: *All right. After work. Gotta run. Thanks.*

He closed the chat, replaced the chair as it was, then hurried out of the study. Back in the kitchen, he wondered what to do. His brain was spinning. His parents knew everything! And they’d been pretending, lying to him just like he’d
been lying to them.

“Take that!” Bane grunted from the other room.

Why hadn’t they confronted him? Grounded him like normal parents? But the answer seemed obvious: *Because what’s wrong with me is so serious,* he thought sickly, *they had to wait for the doctor’s advice.* There’d be no way to avoid that doctor’s appointment
tomorrow. Dr. Vincent’s office would call to confirm. They always did. And then what?

Something Dr. Vincent had said at the last visit popped back into Oliver’s head: We can always try again. He’d made it sound like Oliver was an experiment. One that was clearly failing. And what did you do with a failed
experiment? You ended it and started over.

“Baaahhh!! Die, humans!” Bane shouted.

Oliver paced around. He had to act like everything was normal, didn’t he? At least until the next evening…. But then what? Go to school? Come home for dinner and act surprised when his parents wanted to take him to the doctor? What other choice
did he have? There was no way out of this. Not that Oliver could think of.

But, no. No. He couldn’t stay here any longer, thinking, pretending, fearing everything. Grabbing his sweatshirt, he left the kitchen without a sound and headed out into the night.

When he slipped out of the sewer at the end of Twilight Lane, Oliver
glanced back at his house and couldn’t help wondering if he would ever return.
Chapter 13

Dress Rehearsal

OLIVER HEADED FOR EMALIE’S house. The rain had mixed with sleet, and tiny bits of ice bounced off him as he walked. When he arrived, he saw that the basement was dark but, of course, it was almost four in the morning.
There was blue light flickering from the living room. Oliver hopped up on the porch and carefully peered in the window. Emalie’s father was asleep on the couch, half-wrapped in a blanket and still in his clothes. Television light washed over him in morphing colors.

Oliver circled around the back of the house and let
himself into the basement. He headed up a rickety set of wooden stairs and into the kitchen. He moved silently down the one hallway, past a bathroom, and found another tiny staircase that twisted up to the second floor. The stairs ended at a short hallway. Up here, the ceilings were low. The top corners of the walls were angled to the slope of the roof. There was a door
open to a mess of a bedroom on one end and a closed door at the other. Oliver quietly opened this door and found himself in Emalie’s room.

There were unpacked boxes in the corners, but the walls were covered with a layered patchwork of photographs as if she’d been living here for years. Emalie’s bed was beneath the one small window at the far
end of the room. He saw her hair above the blankets and could hear her sleeping breaths. He closed the door and moved over to the wall. There was a large box with a laptop on it, and a square pillow pulled up in front of it as a makeshift desk. Oliver sat beside this, pulled his knees up to his elbows, and leaned his head back on the wall.
Outside, the sleet came down harder, rattling the window and tapping drumrolls on the roof. Oliver stared into space, his thoughts unwinding. He found that, for the first time in a while, he actually felt safe. No one from his family could get to him here, without being invited in. From your fake family, he thought darkly.

Suddenly, Emalie bolted
up in her bed. “What,” she whispered. “Don’t hurt him. It’s not your fault.” Her head whipped back and forth, but Oliver could see that her eyes were still closed. “It’s—” Now she froze. Oliver watched as she turned toward him, and her eyes slowly blinked open. She squinted, then rubbed at her long tangles of hair. Oliver wondered if he should
spectralize, but then Emalie spoke:

“Hey,” she said groggily.

“Hey,” Oliver replied.

“What are you doing here?”

“I didn’t know where to go,” Oliver said truthfully.

“My parents know about you. They know about everything.”

Emalie put her feet on the floor and scratched at her
head. Then she got up, crossing the room to an open box beside the closet. She rummaged around and pulled out a blanket. She threw it to him as she headed back to bed. “What are you going to do?” she asked, sliding back under her blankets.

“I don’t know,” Oliver muttered.

“You should stay here,” Emalie said. “I have school
tomorrow, and after that Dean and I have a dress rehearsal for our holiday concert. You can hang out here during the day.”

“What about your dad?”

“He’ll be out for most of the day, probably,” Emalie said. “But you’re pretty good at not being seen.”

Oliver pulled the blanket over him. It felt scratchy compared to the dirt in his
coffin, but it warmed him almost as well. The sound of the sleet seemed very loud to him. You could barely hear such a thing from a crypt. A car rushed by outside, and a warped rectangle of light crossed the room. Now Oliver noticed stars on the ceiling. They seemed to be glowing stickers, and they were arranged in perfect constellations. He saw
Scorpio, Orion, Cassiopeia.

Oliver looked over at Emalie. She was looking back at him. “How come you’re not scared of me?” he asked.

Emalie shrugged. “I don’t know. You don’t seem that scary.”

Oliver smiled. That was almost an insult for a vampire, but he didn’t mind.

“Well,” Emalie went on, propping herself up with her
elbow on her pillow, “I mean, you’re kinda scary. I don’t know, I think the only people that scare me are the ones who like themselves too much, and who think they’re always right. You don’t seem to like yourself too much.”

“But I’m not people,” said Oliver. “I’m not even a person.”

“I think you’re a person,” said Emalie. “And...I mean,
you were one. You were born a human just like the rest of us.”

Oliver looked around the room, trying to imagine being a human kid. Waking up and looking in a mirror, then out a window to decide what to wear. After a minute, he looked back at Emalie, expecting her to be asleep, but she wasn’t. “What happened to your mom?”
Oliver asked.

There was a moment of silence, and Oliver wondered if he shouldn’t have asked. But then Emalie sighed and said, “Nobody knows. She’s been gone for two years. She was a flight attendant. She left one morning like any other day. And that was it.” She glanced out the window. “My dad is still upset. He keeps trying to look for her,
but he doesn’t know how.”

“Sorry,” Oliver said.

Emalie kept gazing out at the sleet. Headlights slid across her face. When she continued, Oliver thought she might sound sad, but she didn’t. “I see her sometimes, in my dreams. She’s always somewhere ancient. I don’t know why. I mean, she liked history and visiting old places. Maybe that’s what
makes me think of it. Whenever I dream about her, it’s like I’m in her head, looking out through her eyes. Like I am her, or something. It’s messed up.”

“Maybe you really are,” Oliver said, thinking about what Désirée had told him. She’d referred to Emalie as an Orani—a seer. The Orani were an ancient and secretive order of humans, known for
their ability to “see” into a person’s future. The Orani were also rumored to be able to read people’s minds, even communicate with wraiths and spirits in the other worlds. Oliver remembered hearing that where most humans had only a tiny bit of intuition, the Orani could use intuition like a whole other sixth sense. They could sense one’s attitudes, desires, and
fears, and guess what they would do in the future, with startling accuracy.

These powers had actually caused the Orani lots of trouble in history. They had been regularly imprisoned and kept as slaves by kings and leaders, and sometimes burned at the stake by fearful villagers. Some governments had done awful experiments on them, such
that the Orani kept their identity secret. Emalie didn’t even seem to know that she was one, yet, but the fact that she joined Oliver in the portal vision made it likely that she really was. And it didn’t sound strange at all for her to be sharing visions with her mother, since Orani sight was passed down the generations.

“Yeah, right,” said Emalie, rolling over. “She’s
probably dead, or happy. She never seemed happy when she was here. Either way, she’s gone.”

Oliver couldn’t think of anything else to say. If he found a way out of his current mess, he wanted to help Emalie learn more about her identity.

The sleet was changing back to rain. Water ran down the window in sheets. “Good
night, Emalie,” Oliver whispered.

“Gnnd,” Emalie mumbled. Soon her sleeping breaths returned and, as Oliver would find to his surprise later on, he fell asleep as well.

Oliver awoke in the early afternoon to dull orange light. He was lying on his side, curled up on the floor, and
Emalie had thrown her thick orange comforter over the rest of him. She’d also thought to hang a blanket over the bare window.

Oliver found the house empty. He also found that he was starving. He went to the kitchen. There was little that a vampire would like, but he did find a sugary cereal: Count Chocula. He frowned but poured a bowl and turned
to sit, only the kitchen table was bathed in daylight. He went into the living room but found the same problem with the couch. He ended up eating in the bathroom.

After that, he felt better, but he was still thirsty, so he headed into the basement to find a rat, but had to settle for a mouse. Then he returned upstairs. He looked around for a while but didn’t know
what to do with himself. Returning to Emalie’s room, he tried going back to sleep, but it didn’t work. His thoughts were only getting more crazy as the afternoon went on. By now, Phlox and Sebastian would definitely be looking for him in the Underground. They might even have figured out what he knew about what they knew. Oliver wished more than
anything that there was some way to just make this entire situation go away, but how? There didn’t seem to be a solution.

At four in the afternoon, Oliver headed for school. It was the evening before Longest Night, and so darkness had already started to fall on the city. For the humans, this was the last day of school before their
Christmas vacation. There was an excited speed to the way everyone was moving. It was cold, the wind whipping a light rain so that it felt like pinpricks. Oliver made most of the journey sitting atop a city bus.

Rodrigo hadn’t even arrived yet. Oliver let himself in. The halls were quiet. The cheery holiday decorations had yet to be overrun by
Oliver crept up to the main floor. He heard light talking and shuffling of papers in the main office. Then the faint sound of singing voices reached his ears. Oliver headed toward it.

At the end of the hall he reached a set of double doors. He peered inside. The lights were off except for spotlights. They were aimed at two sets of risers on the floor in front
of the stage. The chorus stood there, their teacher in front. Behind them, the curtain was pulled closed across the stage and decorated with the cut-out snowflakes from the art room. Behind the conductor, empty chairs were arranged in neat rows. The kids were in the middle of a bouncy song about winter.

Oliver slid inside. He spectralized and scaled the
wall. He reached the high ceiling, crossed it, and stopped at the metal scaffolding that hung down and held a basketball hoop. He slid down one of these poles and sat on top of the backboard.

Emalie was in the second row. She wore a hooded brown sweater, and surprisingly, had her hair down. Dean was in the back.
Everyone else was staring at the teacher as they sang, but Emalie looked around now and then. Oliver wondered if she was looking for him.

As with the human children’s art, this chorus wasn’t very skilled by vampire standards. Still, listening to these middle-school voices was nice, despite their flaws. Oliver enjoyed how their singing
echoed around the giant box of a room. He also enjoyed the hollow silences between songs, when the resonance of the last song still lingered, and the anticipation for the next song was building. They sang for another half hour, during which time Oliver relaxed and barely thought about his troubles. Finally, the last piece ended and the students began to gather their
things.

“Remember,” their teacher was saying, “everyone must be here by six tomorrow night to warm up before the show. Don’t forget to—” Her voice was cut off by a loud banging, from a door down in the hallway beside the stage. The teacher huffed and headed toward the hall. “I’ve asked you before, students,” she
grumbled, “to please tell your parents to wait outside until I excuse you.”

She disappeared into the hall, and Oliver looked back to Emalie. She was looking right at him and waved quickly. The other students were beginning to head out the double doors into the hall.

Oliver heard the back door opening and the teacher saying, “I’m sorry, but the
school is closed and we’re in the middle of—” but then her voice cut off. There was a loud thud. A couple of students heard it and turned.

“All right, everyone!” A high-pitched voice called. It sounded like a girl—no, like a boy pretending to be a girl—

Bane and his friends stormed into the gym. Oliver froze. Some of the students
looked up. They had no reason to suspect what was really happening.

Bane was carrying a long staff with a blue crystal on top. Oliver had never seen it before. Bane leaned it against his shoulder and clapped his hands together, continuing in his fake teacher’s voice, “Places, please! Let’s get these songs into shape!”

The humans recognized
that Bane and his friends were bullies, and they scowled and hurried their steps toward the door. Oliver saw Dean grab Emalie’s arm to leave, but she was staring hard at Bane.

“Chop-chop!” Bane yelled in the girl’s voice. And then he shoved the nearest human, a boy, and sent him flying across the room.

Now the kids started to
run for the door.

“Randall!” Bane barked in his normal voice.

Randall sprinted past him and leaped into the air, flying across the room and landing just in front of the double doors. He turned and crossed his arms.

Someone screamed.

“Nobody leaves!” Bane shouted. “Not until we straighten a few things out.”
Oliver slipped back up the pole to the ceiling. He counted: There were twelve kids left in the gym. They all backed away from Bane and Ty at one end, and Randall at the other, until they formed a tight group in front of the risers. Ty and Bane separated, making a triangle around the group.

“Kids,” Bane said, lowering his voice and
flashing a devilish grin that revealed the points of his teeth. “There’s no need to worry. This won’t take long, and it may not even hurt that bad.” As he said this, he waved the staff in the kids’ directions. The humans were silent except for whimpers. Bane turned his head. “Hey, little brother!” he shouted into the dark recesses of the gym.
Oliver pressed against the ceiling, but he already knew it was no use.

“Come on, little lamb, you know I know you’re here.”

Oliver tried to think of what to do, but his thoughts felt frozen.

“Look,” Bane called. “Big brother is here to help, so if you don’t come down, here’s what I’m going to do: I’m
going to kill each of these kids, one at a time, until you do—starting with this one!”

Bane lunged and grabbed a shorter girl from the edge of the group. She screamed as he pulled her near, dropping her music folder, its sheets spilling across the floor.

“All right!” Oliver vaulted off the ceiling, landing beside Bane. He glared at his so-called brother
with all the hate he could muster.

Bane just smiled. “Hey, kid,” he said, and shoved the girl back into the terrified group. “You know you’ve got Mom and Dad worried sick.”

Oliver shook his head. “Yeah, right,” he muttered. “Just get out of here, Bane.”

“Ha, whatever. I knew we’d find you here. It was so obvious.” Bane turned toward
the kids. “So...which ones are they?”

Oliver didn’t risk even glancing at the humans. “They’re not here—”

Bane rolled his eyes. “Of course, they’re here. That’s why you’re here. So, come on, point out your cow friends. Don’t make me guess.”

“Bane!” Oliver snapped. “Come on, you found me.
Just take me home, and you can be the big hero.”

Bane looked at Oliver for a long moment. Oliver found, right then, that he had no idea what was going through Bane’s mind. Finally, Bane sighed. “Nah. You need help, bro. That’s why I’m here. If I take you home, it’s going to be all with the what’s wrong with our baby?! And I am so sick of that.” Bane threw an
arm around Oliver’s shoulder. “Nope, we’re going to fix you, right here, right now.”

Oliver shoved Bane away. “I’m fine. Just leave me alone!”

“Believe me, I’d love to! But you’re my best excuse for a brother,” Bane said, wrapping his arm around Oliver again, this time, with a grip that Oliver couldn’t break. “That’s why Bane’s
here to make it all better.” As he said this, Bane pointed at the humans with the staff he was carrying. Oliver could see now that it was made of basic wood, except for the top, where a bony hand of metal held a crystal sphere with turquoise light swirling inside it. Oliver didn’t know what it might be, but it looked like something enchanted.

Bane twisted Oliver
toward the crowd of terrified human faces, then spoke softly by Oliver’s ear, but still loud enough for everyone in the room to hear, “Now, pick one.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Pick the lucky human who’s going to be your first victim.”

The humans gasped and cried out.

“Everybody shut up,
please,” Ty said gleefully.

“No! Bane.” Oliver struggled against his grip.

“I’m not. I won’t.”

“You are, little brother,” Bane snarled, “And you will. Sometimes you gotta grow up early, and that’s what you’re going to do right now. So pick one, or I’ll pick for you.”

Oliver’s eyes darted from one child to the next, trying with all his might not to
linger on Emalie or Dean. What could he do? He was trying to think—

“Three seconds, little bro,” Bane announced, his grip on Oliver’s shoulder tightening. “One…”

Oliver squirmed, but it was no use. He looked miserably across the terrified faces, and as he passed Emalie, he saw her mouth moving. Oliver watched her
in the corner of his eye. What was she saying? It looked like, *Pick me.*

No. He couldn’t. She probably felt responsible, like this was all her fault.

“Two…” Bane called dramatically.

Oliver looked desperately around. He couldn’t do this, he—

“Three!” Bane announced. He flashed a
triumphant look at Oliver, then turned and pointed right at Emalie. “I choose her!”

“No!” Oliver screamed.

“Um, yeah. Ty!”

Ty moved toward the group, grinning at Emalie.

“All right, fine!” shouted Oliver, trying to shake free.

“I’ll choose!”

Bane finally let him go.

“Do it now, lamb,” he hissed.

Oliver glanced at the
group. A plan was finally forming in his head. It was risky, and he would need someone to play along.... So Oliver leaped forward, shooting into the crowd and slamming into Dean. He grabbed Dean’s shoulders, and the two hit the floor and slid toward the wall.

“Oliver, no! Don’t!” Dean stammered as they came to a halt. “Please!”
“Relax!” Oliver hissed into his ear. “I’m not, I just—I had to do something. Now scream.” Dean didn’t do anything. “Scream!” Oliver snapped, and moved his head closer to Dean’s neck, trying to make it look like he was biting Dean.

“Ahhh—noo!” Dean screamed. Oliver kept his face by Dean’s neck but glanced up toward the double
doors. Randall was watching them with a wide smile on his face. Could Oliver could surprise him? He readied to jump. Dean was putting on a good show of screaming, though Oliver could tell that he really was terrified.

And Oliver thought sadly that Dean was right to be scared: Because even though Oliver told himself he would never bite Dean, with his face
right by Dean’s neck like this, he could feel Dean’s pulse. He could hear the blood racing through Dean’s arteries. A wave of hopelessness flashed over him. How could he fight what he was? No, he thought. That’s not what I am!

“Come on, Oliver!” Bane shouted from behind. Oliver tensed, preparing to jump free of Dean—
But suddenly, there was an explosion of sparkling turquoise light. Oliver was blinded. *Bane*, he started to think…

When a strange voice thundered in his head, so loud that it drowned out all his thoughts:

*Oliver, don’t fight it, my boy. It’s time.*

Oliver lost all feeling in his body, lost track of his
senses, his surroundings, and time.
Chapter 14
The Gate and the Stake

THE TURQUOISE LIGHT FADED to darkness. Oliver had a sense of rising, of leaving his body and reality behind and moving through worlds. Was this another portal? It seemed
to be.

Barriers of energy fluttered aside like curtains. Oliver couldn’t see himself, but he had a sense that he was floating, moving through dark space at an incredible speed. Around him there were shrouded forms, like clouds at night. And occasionally, white streaks of light in the distance.

Suddenly, there was land
below. Oliver saw a rocky landscape of knife-edge mountains and canyons filled with glowing lava. He wondered if this was a level of the Underworld, yet there were brilliant stars above, more brilliant than he’d ever seen, along with planets, and brushstrokes of galaxies that seemed close enough to touch.

And he was moving faster
and faster. Now he saw buildings down among the mountains and canyons, buildings that glowed as if made of fabulous minerals—yet they blurred beneath him. More galaxies above, and nebulae like smudged rainbows, littered with diamonds. Yet they flew by, too.

*Oliver.* The voice spoke again. It was calm, serene,
and ancient. *This is the first step into a higher world for you.*

Who are you? Oliver thought back wildly.

*I am Illisius. I am your demon.*

**Illisius,** Oliver repeated, feeling like, in some way, he’d known the name forever.

**Welcome.**

**Where am I?** Oliver asked.
You are in Nexia, where all worlds meet, the birthplace of the forces, where you will soon travel.

I don’t—

It’s okay. Illisius’s voice was all around him, soothing. All you need to know is that when you are ready, you will journey here. Then we will open the Gate, and free the vampyr from Earth.

Me? How?
In time, I will show you. You have already taken the first steps.

But, I’m not—

Oliver.... This is your destiny. You are the only one who can do this. And you must. Let no one tell you otherwise.

How—

I will visit you again soon. Until then, all you need to know is ahead of you now.
Oliver looked ahead. He was weaving through a maze of canyons, their red walls rising precipitously all around him. Now something incredibly bright shone in the far distance. Its light was golden, and silver, and rose, and pure white.

Oliver shot free of the canyon. Vast plains of red rock spread into the distance. He saw a single black road
snaking along beneath him. To either side, the horizon seemed infinitely far, and overhead, the jeweled sky was more brilliant than ever.

But that light ahead—even though it nearly blinded him to look at it, that was all he wanted to do. Just stare into it, and he did.

Vaguely, he noticed a man standing far below on the road as he raced
overhead, toward the light with its indescribable color... and more than that...this light felt alive. He almost felt like he knew it...like if he just stared long enough, he could see the face of it, of the Gate

Oliver, the Gate said in his mind. Its voice seemed familiar, too. *See me clearly.* Oliver squinted, trying, and almost thought he could make
out a shape in the overwhelming light—

Then he was past it. He tried to crane his neck to look behind him, but he was moving too quickly. The red land was disappearing below him. Space was returning... worlds pushing aside again, rushing faster. Still, the light of the Gate burned in Oliver’s eyes, a leftover brightness that he didn’t want to lose.
The light lingered. Slowly, Oliver felt himself returning to his body, to reality. As he did, part of an ancient lullaby ran through his mind...

See the sun or the stake you must,
Run right home or turn to dust.

His mother, Phlox—not my mother!—used to sing that to
him as she tucked him in at night. Oliver felt a deep ache. Phlox had a beautiful alto’s voice, having trained for fifty years in Vienna. She would sing and smooth Oliver’s soil just so, and what was that memory now? Was it real, or a lie? It seemed so simple, and maybe that was why he’d thought of it. Things weren’t simple anymore—maybe they never would be again.
Oliver felt his arms and legs, and now something hard against his back. Floor. He blinked hard, and the brightness faded and started to separate, into squares, with dark lines.

It was a tall window. The light coming through it was not that wonderful light from the Gate. It was the soft orange of streetlights. Oliver sat up to find himself in his
classroom, upstairs. He was sitting between the rows of desks. He rubbed at his head, then at his jaw. Everything felt sore.

What had happened? The last thing he remembered was pretending to attack Dean and getting ready to jump at Randall. Had he? He wasn’t sure, because then there was that weird flash of turquoise, and then the red world,
Nexia, the voice of Illisius, and the brilliant Gate. Had that been a dream? No, a vision.

*Oliver, see me clearly,* the Gate had said, it’s voice so strangely familiar…

Something creaked behind him. Oliver cocked his head and heard footsteps slowly entering the room. He turned slowly, but he already knew it was Emalie. She was
moving behind him, her back against the wall, passing in and out of the distorted rectangles of streetlight. The sleeve of her sweater was torn, and her hair was a mess around her face. She glanced at him, and Oliver saw her red-rimmed eyes and tear-streaked face, before she looked away, almost like—Like she’s scared of me.

“Emalie,” Oliver began.
She stopped and slid down the wall, sitting and hugging her knees. She started to cry quietly.

Oliver felt a sinking feeling inside, but he wasn’t sure why. Something was very wrong, though. “What happened?” he asked. She didn’t answer. “What am I doing up here?” He twisted around and started to get to his feet.
“Stop.” Emalie looked up, and her gaze was awful. She held out her arms, shaking. Clutched in both hands was her wooden stake.

Oliver froze, staring at the stake. Why did she have that with her at school? And how many other times had she had it along that Oliver hadn’t known about? “What are you doing with that thing?”

“Stop it,” Emalie said
darkly. “Stop talking like a human. Stop looking at me like a human. You’re not human.”

The sinking feeling inside Oliver was getting worse. “What happened? I don’t—”

But Emalie’s face crumbled and she started to cry, silently, again.

Oliver stood up. He listened, but the school was silent. Where were Bane and
his friends? The other students?

Now a faint sound reached his ears from outside, wailing, growing louder. Sirens. Oliver turned back to Emalie, as something occurred to him.

“Emalie,” he said quietly, not wanting to ask, “Where’s Dean?”

Emalie’s face twisted further, and she sobbed.
“Oh, no,” he mumbled aloud. Oliver started to shake, squeezing his fists so tightly that his nails dug into his palms. “Bane…Emalie, I’m sorry, he…”

“NO!” she shouted at him, pushing back up the wall and waving the stake at him. “You aren’t sorry! Monsters can’t be sorry!”

“N…no,” Oliver stammered. “I know, but
Bane and I are different. I would never hurt anyone. He—"

“Stop it!” Emalie yelled.
“Stop what?” Oliver asked desperately.

Emalie seemed to be fighting the words, like she didn’t want to say them. Oliver didn’t want her to either. But then she did.

“You killed Dean!” She screamed, waving the stake at
him. “You killed Dean!”

Oliver was stunned. “I—

Wait…” It couldn’t be true.

“No, I didn’t! I—”

“Stop trying to lie, Oliver! I saw you do it!”

“What?!?” Oliver felt like

the world was spinning

around him. He was

beginning to wonder if this

was still a dream, or maybe

another portal. He hoped it

was, and yet the awful
swirling pit that was forming in his stomach knew better.

This was real, terribly real.

“You jumped on him, and he screamed,” Emalie sobbed. “And you bit him in the neck and you just kept biting and he was shouting for help and I couldn’t get to him, I—” Emalie shuddered. “And then he stopped shouting. He stopped moving...and you
jumped up and ran out of the room!” Emalie swallowed a sob. “Then your friends let us go. But I didn’t leave. I couldn’t.”

There were more sirens now. They were getting louder, closer. Oliver could hear voices outside. People were coming. What was Emalie talking about? How could he have done such a thing? There was no way—
“Emalie,” he said desperately, “I don’t remember anything after I jumped. But I couldn’t have! I was going to try to get us out of there. It must have been Bane, he probably—”

“Look at you!” she shouted.

“What?”

“Look at your face!” Emalie shook her head. “Oh, that’s right, you can’t.
Because you’re a monster!” Oliver reached to his face with shaking fingers. He touched his cheek, by his mouth, and came away with flakes of—blood.

No. No! He couldn’t have done it. Why didn’t he remember what had happened? “Emalie, I didn’t… I wasn’t even there! I… I had this vision, but still— I… I couldn’t—” Without
thinking, he took a step toward her.

“Stop! If you come closer I’ll stake you, Oliver, I swear.” Her hands shook, the stake wavering back and forth.

The sirens were joined by roaring engines circling into the parking lot. Shoes slapped on stairs, and now the doors to the school were bursting open.
“In here!” a woman’s voice—the choral teacher—shouted.

Emalie started sliding back toward the door.

“Emalie, please,” Oliver begged. “You have to believe me—”

“How could you?” She started to cry again. “How could you, Oliver?” Then she dropped the stake and ran out.

Oliver watched the stake
rolling on the floor. *Maybe I should pick it up, he thought.*

Maybe I should just—

But now he heard boots thundering up the stairs. “She said he’s up here!”

Oliver bolted for the door, then turned and staggered down the hall. Distantly, he heard more commotion downstairs: parents, students, paramedics. He wanted so badly, *needed* to get back
down there. How could he have killed Dean? There was no way. It was just impossible. There had to be another explanation—but what? An enchantment of some kind? A trick? Yet he couldn’t help hearing Emalie’s voice: *How could you?* And now he’d lost her forever.

He reached a janitor’s closet and slid inside, then
spun to peer out the cracked door. Two police officers rushed across the hallway into the classroom where he’d just been. Oliver heard more crying from downstairs.

He stood frozen, not knowing what else to do. The officers emerged and started moving up the hall toward him. They split up to check the next two classrooms.

Oliver ducked back into
the closet, squeezing between two supply shelves. On the back wall was a small metal door: a trash chute. Oliver pulled it open and slid inside. He dropped down into darkness, all the way to the basement, where he landed in a Dumpster. From there, he escaped into the sewers, through the secret door that the vampires used in the bright months of the year.
Eventually, he stopped in an abandoned side tunnel and just sat, for how many hours he didn’t know. He couldn’t believe what he’d done. And yet, he felt sure that he hadn’t killed Dean, despite what Emalie had said. It just wasn’t possible. But I’m a vampire, he reminded himself bitterly. A monster, as Emalie had put it. So wasn’t it possible? Maybe that vision,
from Illisius, had put him in some kind of trance. No, there had to be something else.

Bane had that staff. There was that blue light. What had Bane done? *Or was it really me?*

Hours went by. Oliver just sat, not knowing what to do next. Where could he even go? Yet there was really only one place left for him,
and so he got up and trudged off.
Chapter 15

Longest Night

OLIVER CLOSED THE DOOR and paused at the base of the stairs. He listened: The house was silent. Still, he walked as quietly as he could down the hall to the bathroom. He hunched over the wide stone sink in the center of the room
and cleaned his face. Then he headed upstairs. The kitchen was still. Everyone was probably out looking for him.

What to do now? But Oliver knew his plan, there was no point second-guessing it. He was going to sit down in the living room, play some videogames, and wait. His parents would return, and whatever was going to happen would happen.
Whatever punishment he received was going to be nothing compared to the way he felt inside. He was a vampire who needed to be fixed.

*And one with a destiny,* he reminded himself. All the mystery and lies, the force treatments, even those strange looks he’d gotten in the underground: it all made sense now. There was a
reason he was different. He had been chosen, specially created even, to open a Gate in a place called Nexia. That demon, Illisius, had said he was the only one who could do this. But what exactly was this Gate? And how many people knew about his destiny? His parents, Half-Light...who else? Did all the adult vampires know? And the biggest question of all:
why wouldn’t his parents keep all this a secret from him? Why had they lied to him?

He’d decided that, for now, he would keep quiet about his vision of Illisius, until he could find out more. But he had no idea how he was going to do that alone.

Oliver grabbed a soda from the refrigerator and walked into the dark living
room. He headed straight toward the TV.

Suddenly, the lights flicked on.

“SURPRISE!” Oliver whipped around to find Phlox, Sebastian, his aunt Elanor and uncle David, his cousins Nina and Emmett, and even Bane, all sitting around the living room, looking at him—

And smiling. Oliver had
no idea what to think.

“Well, Oliver,” Sebastian said, standing and clapping him on the back. “Charles told us everything. We were pretty worried before, but, well, now I guess congratulations are in order, aren’t they?”

“We’re so relieved!” Phlox said, joining them and giving Oliver a big hug. She whispered in his ear, “We just
wish you’d let us in on your big secret.”

“What?” Oliver asked blankly.

Sebastian smiled again, and Oliver thought he looked more relaxed, more relieved than he’d looked in a long time. “We didn’t know what to think when you started befriending those humans, but then Charles explained that it was all part of your
clever plan to get them to trust you, so that you could take your first human bite.”

“He’s a prodigy!” Uncle David called from the couch.

“In front of a crowd, no less,” gushed Aunt Elanor, “and the cousin of the girl! That’s practically diabolical!”

Oliver wanted to run from the room.

“I’m just glad I was there to see it, bro,” Bane added,
slouched comfortably in a chair. Oliver turned, and Bane offered him a sly wink, as if they’d been coconspirators.

Oliver wanted to throw out his hands and scream, *Stop!* He wanted to explain what had really happened—but now he was being led to an open chair beside the family’s Longest Night tree. One of the tiny, leathery
lizards nestled in its silver cage ornament hissed approvingly at him.

"And I am glad this is all behind us," said Phlox, glancing at Oliver. He thought he caught a warning in her voice, but she turned to the rest of the family with a smile.

And just like that, the Nocturnes' celebration of the Longest Night went on, as if
everything was normal. Oliver sat there, numb, watching everyone: his family. He didn’t really believe that his parents actually thought everything was all right, with all they’d kept from him before. But he could tell that they were trying really hard. Which meant that, once again, Oliver was alone with his problems. So he opened gifts when they
did, and smiled at Uncle David’s stories, and all the while felt like he was watching someone else’s world from inside his head.

He understood now that he had Bane to thank for this. Bane had, in his own twisted way, saved Oliver, as far as his parents and the vampire world were concerned. By setting him up to kill Dean, he’d created an excuse for all
of Oliver’s weird behavior over the last few months, one that allowed Phlox and Sebastian, and probably Dr. Vincent and everyone else, to feel like they understood what Oliver had been up to, and to actually be proud of him. Really, it was a pretty amazing feat.

“Aren’t you going to thank me?” Bane said later that night, when they ran into
each other alone in the kitchen.

Oliver glared at him.

“Not that I expected all this,” Bane went on sulkily, filling his goblet. “I didn’t get a surprise party for my first kill.”

“How did you do it?” Oliver hissed.

Bane looked up and smiled again. “Me?” he said like he was shocked. “All I
did was put you in the right place. Then it was you, bro. All you.”

“What about that staff? Was it enchanted? What did you—”

Bane’s smile faded. “Hey, listen: You’re the big hero now.” He reached over and patted Oliver on the back, only a little too hard. “So don’t screw it up, already.” Bane scowled and walked
Oliver wanted to shout after him: *I didn’t kill Dean!* He wanted to shout it loud enough for the whole party to hear. He still felt sure that he hadn’t, and yet, as far as his family was concerned, not only had he killed Dean, but that was something to be celebrated. *Celebrated by my vampire family,* he thought, and was reminded once again
of his human parents. Yet thinking of them was like thinking of Emalie: What good did it do? They were gone. He wasn’t human like them. He was a vampire, whether he liked it or not.

And yet, he kept sifting through ideas of how to prove to Emalie that he hadn’t killed Dean, how to get her back, and how to find out more about his human
parents. For now, though, there was nothing else to be done but to smile and play along with the festivities.

Soon, everyone moved to the dining room for a feast. After that, Oliver played videogames with his cousins and may have forgotten about Emalie and Dean for a second or two while he did so...but much later that morning, when he finally crawled into
his coffin for the first time in days, they stormed back into his thoughts, and he missed them terribly, and there was certainly no getting to sleep.

Three days later was the human festival of Christmas. A day before that, a collection of humans, dressed all in black, gathered on a drizzling morning beneath leafless trees, to bury a loved
one that they had lost. Human lives were short, sometimes far too short. A vampire, who counted existences in centuries, could never understand how it might feel to have a life pass so quickly. And even when one of their kind turned to dust too soon, a vampire had no idea of how a heart could ache. It just wasn’t possible. Yet in the shadow of a moldy
mausoleum just up the hill from this funeral scene, there was one vampire, watching in secret, who wanted more than anything to understand.

When the ceremony was over, Oliver watched the line of mourners heading to their cars. He watched Emalie, her head down, and yet wearing a bright knit hat against the chilling rain, a splotch of color that made her seem like
the only thing in color, in a drab gray world. Maybe Oliver couldn’t understand how short a human life could be, but he found that he could understand very well how long his existence was going to be without his friend.

Oliver returned home that evening, his parents thinking he’d spent the day sleeping over at Seth’s. Lies like that
were already easier, beneath this new glow of vampire pride that surrounded him: Oliver, the devious prodigy child. Nobody wanted to talk about those anxious weeks when Oliver had been acting strangely. Nobody even asked if he’d been sleeping better. Maybe they assumed he was. But he wasn’t. Really, for Oliver, it was like he was right back where he started,
only worse.

He shuffled through the kitchen, past Phlox. “Hi, Oliver.”

Oliver was lost in thought and forgot to reply.

“Hey,” Phlox said.

“Yeah?” Oliver’s back was still to her.

“Oh,” Phlox said. “I was just wondering how your sleepover was.”

Oliver nodded, still facing
away. “It was fine.”

“And everything’s all right?” she asked. “You look a little down.”

“I’m fine.” He almost started walking, then remembered to add, “Mom.”

“I like Seth,” said Phlox. “He seems like a good friend. Maybe you’d like to have him over for your birthday party this weekend?”

Oliver shrugged. He’d
actually forgotten all about his birthday. And now that he remembered it, he realized that it had new meaning. His birthday was the day he was born to Phlox and Sebastian, but it was also the day that he and his human parents had died. It made sense to him now that this was why he’d always been anxious at this time of year. Some part of him had always felt the echo
of that awful night. “All right,” he said blankly, and started to leave the room.

“Honey…” Oliver looked back to find Phlox gazing at him lovingly. “You’re probably still feeling a little weird after the other night.”

Oliver shrugged. “Guess.”

“Well, don’t worry. The first bite can be hard, but you’ll feel better than ever as time goes by.”
“Okay.” Oliver turned again.

“You’re growing up fast,” Phlox added, her voice getting scratchy.

“Mmm.”

“Just remember, if you ever want to talk about anything, we’re here, okay?”

“All right,” Oliver mumbled.

“Because no matter what,” added Phlox, “we love
“I love you, too, Mom,” Oliver answered, and as he left the room, he wondered if he’d been referring to someone else entirely.

School had gone on break for the week after Longest Night. When Oliver walked in on the first day back, he didn’t know what to expect.

“There he is!” A voice
shouted the moment he stepped into the room. With a rush of air, Theo landed in front of him. He stood tall in front of Oliver, but strangely, Brent and Maggots stayed on the wall.

“What?” Oliver muttered. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Suzyn and the other girls looking their way. Once again, with Oliver’s arrival, conversation in the
classroom had slowed to a halt.

Theo’s arms shot forward, shoving Oliver—but only lightly. “Why didn’t you tell us, you freak?”

Oliver shrugged weakly. “What are you talking about?”

“With the humans,” Theo went on, “why didn’t you let us in on it?”

“Oh.” Oliver nodded.
He’d gotten used to the way things had changed at home, but he hadn’t expected it here as well. Everyone in his family was treating him like he was someone to be proud of. It wasn’t just that they thought his problems were over. They acted like he was special, like he’d become some kind of celebrity.

And now, as he finally looked up, Oliver saw it in
Theo’s eyes, too. The contempt was gone. Theo almost looked, afraid? That didn’t seem possible, and yet that’s what Oliver sensed from him right now. So Oliver threw back his shoulders. “Well, why would I tell you guys? You might have given it away.”

Theo smirked, but again, there was some uncertainty to it. “Well, it’s a good thing we
were there in the Underground, huh? We really helped you out by exposing the humans, so you could make your big escape, the one everyone in town is talking about.”

Oliver shrugged. The idea that everyone in town was talking about it was news to him, but he played along. “Sure.”

Theo kept smiling, but
now he raised his voice so everyone could clearly hear. “So I guess we were a pretty important part of your plan, then?”

Oliver almost laughed out loud. And he realized that his chance to get Theo back for so many moments of torment had arrived. Everyone in class was listening, and unbelievably, Oliver had the power. He could crush Theo
right here, right now. But instead, he said, “Thanks,” flatly, and stepped past Theo. He felt eyes on him as he slid into his desk, and heard Theo jump back up to the wall. “I knew it,” he said to Brent and Maggots, but loudly enough for the girls to hear, too: “If it hadn’t been for us, he wouldn’t be the big story he is.”

Oliver slumped in his
“Hey, Oliver,” Seth said, looking up from his cards.

“Hey.”

“Thanks again for having me at your party,” he said a little too eagerly.

While Oliver had to admit that life was easier living with this newest lie, the one where he was a vampire to be respected and maybe even feared, one who had
displayed treachery that had even fooled his own family, in order to make his first human bite—

It did nothing for Oliver on the inside. It was like he’d been handed a cruel joke of a consolation prize for losing what mattered to him most. *You aren’t sorry!* Emalie’s words echoed in his mind. *Monsters can’t be sorry!* Yet he was. Not that she
would ever believe him. Not until he found a way to prove to her that he hadn’t killed Dean.

Mr. VanWick swept in, and the night’s lessons began. Oliver leaned on his desk, half-listening as they finished the chapter on the Aztecs and moved on to the cannibal tribes of the South Pacific. Eventually, he slid back in his seat.
As he did, his knee brushed something underneath his desk. It crinkled. Oliver sat up. Looking around to make sure no one had heard, he slipped his hand along the underside of his desk. There, wedged between the desktop and the metal legs, Oliver found a tightly folded paper. He removed it, opening it slowly beneath the desk. Then, as
Mr. VanWick turned toward the blackboard, he slid it onto his textbook.

It was a print out of a newspaper article. The headline read:

CHRISTMAS TRAGEDY:  
Mother and Father Slain,  
Child Missing

There was a grainy black-and-white photo beneath the
headline, of police officers milling around the Christmas tree—the one Oliver remembered from the portal vision. He glanced at the date above the headline: sixty-four years ago. The article began beneath the photo:

SEATTLE—DEC. 29
— A young family was attacked in cold blood last night. The mother
and father, Mr. Howard Bailey and wife, Lindsey, were found dead beneath the city Christmas tree. The whereabouts of their infant son, Nathan, remain unknown, but police have issued an all points bulletin.

(Continued on p. A4)
paper and shoved it into his pocket. His anxiety had returned in a rush.

He knew their names, and his own.

But Oliver also knew, from the scent of the paper, that Emalie knew as well. She had researched the portal vision, left this message for him—which meant there was still a chance that he’d see her again. Still a chance that she
might forgive him, and that she could help him find out more about who he was, and who he was meant to be.
BONUS / Interlude

Amethyst and Jade

Emalie’s Account: Part One
These entries originally appeared on Emalie’s blog in January, between the events of Book One and Book Two.

January 1, 1:15 a.m.
Hey—it’s me.

Happy New Year…
Dean is gone. There. I said it.

But saying it doesn’t help. Saying it doesn’t change what happened:
I killed him. I killed my cousin.

I could lie to you and tell you that a vampire did it—but I know better.

Vampires are just creatures...like a dog, or my new cat Amey. If you put milk in front of Amey, she’s going to lap it up. And she’ll hiss at you if you try to stop her before the bowl is clean, empty, dead...
A vampire is no different.

So whose fault is it? The one who drinks the blood, or the one who puts the dish right there at its feet? I know how it feels to me. I’m the one who put my cousin in front of Oliver…

IT. Oliver = it. Don’t forget that, Emalie.

January 3, 2:45 p.m.
Ms. Davis is a toad! Actually, she’s worse. Scientists wonder what’s living down in the deep, dark bottom of the ocean, down where there’s no light and no warmth, but they don’t even know that one of their mystery creatures has crawled up onto land to run North Seattle Middle School’s newspaper club.

“I’m sorry, Emalie...la la la...but I just
don’t think we should publish an article about your cousin’s death…*la blah lala,*” croaks the toad. “I know you’re upset, but vampires?…*too de-loo de-loo*…Maybe I should talk to your father…”

She says it like she’s so caring, but she’s just another demon. With those giant glasses, like two fishbowls, with a brown piranha in each one, leering
out at me. We know it’s your fault, they say. Thanks.

I.

Hate.

Her.

So, I’ve been down here in the basement with Amey and Jade, my other new kitty, tearing up pictures of its house...shredding them, watching them fall to the floor like snow, along with my tears. What a stupid girl
who took these photos. What a stupid believer.

And do you want to know the worst part? I still believe!!!! Idiot!!! After I tore apart all my silly vampire pictures, do you know what I couldn’t do? Tear up the one thing I should have.

Because I went to the library last week and did some research, and found an article about the night its
parents died, the night I saw into the portal. Oliver’s name used to be Nathan. And his parents were Howard and Lindsey. And I’m asking myself: Why does knowing he was human make it any different?

Because there’s something not right about the night Dean died. I mean, in addition to the everything that’s already so, so wrong
about it. I feel like there’s something else. Like I’m remembering it wrong. I wish I could explain it more.

Oh, Dad’s calling. Gotta run…

January 3, 10:13 p.m.

You won’t believe what happened this afternoon:

When Dad calls me upstairs, I expect it to be something I don’t expect.
That’s how it is with Dad: Cole Joseph Watkins, son of Jonathan and Irene Watkins of Anchorage, Alaska. Once upon a time, in black-and-white pictures, he was a kid called C.J. Then he met what Irene called a “wild girl.” That’s my mother, Margaret Browne. And then he was an adult named Cole, and then he was a father, and a computer programmer, and a
homeowner. But then his wife left him, and it was good-bye to all that, and to the Dad I used to know.

It’s not that he’s not there for me. He is. It’s just that when he is there, he’s not all there. If that makes any sense.

So then today, I’m walking up the stairs, and I’m ready, because it could be any kind of weather in the
kitchen: a hurricane of frustration and throwing the empty milk carton. “There is just no way to keep on top of all this!” he’ll shout, and I’ll feel like it’s my fault for having been born, even when I think I know that’s not how he means it…

Or it could be a tornado of laughing at a comic in the newspaper. “Emalie, you’ve got to see
“this!” he’ll say, and I’ll look and laugh even though it’s not really that funny…

Or, worst of all, it could be an afternoon rain of quiet speaking. “Emalie, have you finished your homework?” he’ll ask with the red eyes that look like they were just rubbed hard to clean up the tears…

Of course, the one kind of weather I don’t expect
at all is a bright, sunny afternoon.

“Hey kiddo,” he says, standing by the door, putting on his jacket. The first thing I notice is his face has no stubble. His hair is just-showered wet and sticky with gel. He looks like he popped out of a time vortex from two and a half years ago, before Mom left.

And then more
surprises:

“Your aunt Kathleen called.”

Whoa. That’s mom’s aunt, my great aunt.

“They’ve got a job opening down at the docks,” Dad is saying. “They want me to interview.”

I look at him sideways. Careful, Emalie. This is feeling good. What’s the catch? “So?”
He almost laughs. “Well, so we’re going down for the interview. Kathleen wanted to see you too. It’s been a while.”

A shaved face and a job interview? I’m thinking about collapsing to the floor and then maybe jumping up and making pancakes and drinking syrup straight from the bottle. Instead, I just look around our kitchen, at the
boxes that are still half-unpacked after three months of living here, at the one frying pan on the stove that never comes quite clean. If my dad had a job we could get nonstick. Nonstick. It sounds like the future.

But I show nothing on my face. Just look out the window by his shoulder and say: “Okay.” I am good at this. Emalie who doesn’t get
her hopes up.

I grab my vest, scarf, hat, and gloves, and we grab the bus down to Ballard. We are as quiet as ever on the way, Dad staring out the window, me with headphones on. But I am watching him. I still can’t get over the shaved chin. It’s so smooth. There is a zit there. He’s not that old, this dad of mine. I’ve never thought of him as not so old
before. He fidgets in his seat like it’s his first day of school. Do adults still have first days of school?

On the way, I daydream: If this job pans out, maybe we could have nonstick and one of those pepper grinders. With the multicolored pepper. Oh man, that’s the good stuff! I would grind that thing straight into my mouth. Pepper. Syrup.
Pepper. Syrup…

We get off the bus on Leary and head down toward the canal. Crossing streets of windowless warehouses and forgotten train tracks, the pavement lumpy around the smooth steel lines. The sky is pool blue, the sun brilliant white, and a cold breeze that smells sour like the ocean ripples our clothes and makes us squint. You can’t breathe
too deep because everything is tense against that coldness. The sun is barely over the top of Queen Anne Hill and there are four-month-long shadows between the warehouses. The dirt alleys between them have puddles that will be there all winter.

We reach the canal, lined with these giant fishing boats streaked with rust. There is one sliver of the
water that you can see, and the universe is nice enough to stick a kayaker in the middle of the sparkling blue right as we walk by. A little brown dock sticks out into this space. To the left of the dock is a tiny line of sailboats, wrapped tight in plastic for the winter, huddling like ducklings in the shadow of a huge white fishing boat. To the right is a low wooden
building sticking out into the water on a wharf. It is made of warped boards, and has a pattern of scraped doors and cloudy windows.

Dad stops at one of the doors and I watch him do the deep-breath nervous thing. I know that thing. It’s the same thing you do before you walk out on stage for a chorus concert, or climb through a vampire’s window—
Except *bam!* That makes me think of Dean. Whoa, watch out, Emalie. Almost walked into the sad-mood trap. I shake it off. Gotta focus on Dad.

“Good luck,” I say to him.

He turns, almost like he’s surprised that I’m there. Then he smiles big, and nods at me like we’re partners. “Thanks.”
Inside is a small office with dark wood walls. There are two desks, a neat one and a sloppy one. The sloppy one has an empty chair in front of it and pink crinkled papers smeared across it.

Behind the neat one, all the papers arranged at right angles, sits my great-aunt Kathleen. She’s a big lady, and is wearing a flowery pink shirt that makes
her look bigger than she is. She has hair that is supposed to be blond but looks more like orange, and then gray at the roots…but her eyes look like Mom’s. Which is weird.

“There you are,” she says to Dad, but looks over to me so fast I get a rush of nerves. It’s almost like I’m the one she’s been waiting for.

“Hey, Kathleen,” Dad
says, sounding nervous. I wonder if he notices the Mom eyes too?

Kathleen is standing. “I’m so glad you guys could come down,” she says, and waves at the two brown chairs on the brown rug in front of her brown desk. We sit down.

“So,” Kathleen goes on, “It’s like I told you on the phone, C.J.: We have a small
fishing fleet, three boats. You’d be in charge of overseeing the catch and processing, as well as keeping us in line with the wonderful Fisheries department—"

“Buh.” A wiry, gruff man walks into the room from the back hallway. He has a patchy blond beard and curly hair sticking out from a black hat. He’s wearing rubber overalls that are all
splotchy with blood. He sneers and says: “Fisheries department. Those sons a—”

“Careful, Zeke,” Kathleen warns. “There are innocent ears in the room.” She smiles at me.

I try to smile back but I think: Innocent?! More like murderer’s ears! No. Don’t think about that, Emalie. Almost walked into another sad trap. Man, those traps are
Zeke shrugs and sits at his messy desk. He reaches into his pocket and then drops a new crumply pink paper onto the mess of other pink papers. “Sorry.”

“C.J., this is Zeke. He runs the docks. You’ll be working with him.”

“Hi,” says my dad. Zeke says hi back with his eyebrows.
“Zeke can explain way more about what you’ll be doing than I can,” Kathleen says. “Why don’t you two take a walk around the boats? Zeke, you can show C.J. the ins and outs, and I’ll catch up with my niece here.”

“Don’t you want to see my résumé?” Dad asks. Kathleen just shakes her head. “You’re family.”
She glances at me. “That’s the only résumé you need.”

Dad follows Zeke out the back. I sit there, and I feel Kathleen looking at me. It makes me nervous. Almost like she wants something.

“Want to take a walk out on the pier?” she finally asks.

“Okay.”

We head back outside and past the long line of beat-
up doors and grimy windows. At the end of the building is an open deck, sunlight gleaming off the bleached boards. We walk out to the end and lean on the warped railing. There’s water all around, covered in sparkly diamonds. Off to the right is a rusty boat, and I hear Zeke talking to Dad over there.

“So, how are you, Emalie?” Kathleen asks.
“Fine,” I lie. I don’t like this. It feels like this conversation is going somewhere...

“I’m sorry about your cousin,” she says. And then: “And about the vampire.”

Even in the bright sun, I shudder. How does she know? “What are you—” I start to say.

But she cuts me off. “It’s okay. It’s
understandable that you were curious about vampires. Though they’re based in evil, they are connected to the forces of the larger universe, to the spirits...just like you.”

I look up at her, trying to figure out what she’s talking about, but at the same time, my heart is pounding like an angry fist against my ribs.

“What do you mean?”
And then she says it: “Do you find yourself feeling sad a lot? Like, sad for the people around you, for the world?”

Okay, this is too much. How does she know that?

“Yeah, like, all the time.”

“Well, Emalie,” Kathleen puts her big, soft hand on my shoulder.
“There’s a reason for that. You are connected to the emotions and spirits of the world in a way that very few people are—but I am, and so was your mother.”

I can’t believe this. I am staring at the water and counting the diamonds because what am I supposed to do, or say, or even think?

Kathleen goes on. “You would never have
known this, but we—you, your mother, and me—are descended from a long line of women who are able to sense the spiritual world. We can use this sense in powerful ways—sometimes even to predict the future. We’re called—"

“Orani,” I say, without even knowing I’m going to.

“Yes,” Kathleen
agrees.

I realize that I’ve been holding on to that word since Dead Désirée said it in the Underground. She told Oliver I was an Orani, but then didn’t say any more about it. And I was going to ask Oliver, but…

Aunt Kathleen is going on full steam ahead. “Our bloodline traces all the way back to ancient
Mesopotamia, maybe further.” She is blowing my mind, but at the same time, it’s crazy because I feel like I already know what she is saying. “Not every woman in our family has it, but those who do must keep it secret and be trained. I think your mother hoped it would skip you, so you’d be safe, but I think you and I can be pretty sure now that you are part of
the Orani line. Especially after you joined Oliver in that Portal vision. No ordinary human could have done that.”

I’m spinning. How does she know all these details? It’s almost like she’s reading my mind—

“You’re wondering how I know all this.”

I practically laugh, and yet it’s a relief, too. “Yeah.”
"I can sense it, in the emotions and energy radiating off you. You would never know this, but even from across town, I felt the precise moment when you entered that Portal. If you know what forces to watch, you can see an Orani’s interaction with the spiritual world. It makes ripples like a finger touching water, and you’ve made a lot of ripples
lately.”

My brain is racing past what she is saying. I’m imagining the training: us taking off for a mountain-top retreat and wearing robes and learning how to make objects float and only eating sushi and—

“No,” Kathleen says, and now I know for sure that she’s reading my thoughts. “It’s not like that. You have
to learn about your Orani powers on your own. I can only get you started.”

I look over to see Kathleen holding out her hand. In her palm is a little rolled-up green paper. I take it. It’s a sticky note. I peel it apart and unroll it. Inside is a small oval of red. It looks kind of like a jewel, but maybe more like a hard candy.
“It’s a scarab,” Kathleen explains as I turn it over with my fingers. One side is curved and smooth, and the other is carved into the shape of a beetle. The surface is worn and scuffed.

“It’s a charm from ancient Egypt.”

“This thing is ancient?” I ask. I thought only movie heroes got to have ancient things.
“Mmm. Scarabs have been used to hold charms. This one is called a Conduit.”

I stare at the tiny beetle carving and notice there’s a hole in the top.

“Oh, here.” Kathleen is holding out a tiny silver chain. “So you can wear it. Now...the sticky note tells you where to begin.”

I see writing on it:

CORNER OF MARKET
“What’s this?”

“Listen carefully, Emalie. Go to that spot tomorrow. At that exact time, hold this scarab between your palms and blow on it gently. As you do so, relax your mind. Then your journey as an Orani will begin.”

“My journey? But—”

“Hey, guys!” We both turn fast, like guilty
criminals, to see my dad and Zeke standing by the door to the office.

“Just a sec!” Kathleen says all cheery, but when she turns back to me, her face is dead serious. “Emalie, listen: Something big has begun to happen. Powerful forces are aligning. Your mom knew it, but…”

“But she left,” I say darkly, my words as sharp as
Then Kathleen’s eyes get red and wet. “Emalie, no. Your mother would never have left you.”

I feel the world crowding around me now. “What do you mean?”

“Your mom’s disappearance was not her idea…not at all. She was searching for someone named Selene,” Kathleen says. I
want to respond, but my mouth and brain no longer work. Kathleen pats my shoulder. “Sorry, too much all at once. We’ll talk more soon. Now that your dad has this job, I’ll have a reason to see a lot more of you. In the meantime…Tomorrow. Will you take the conduit charm and do as I ask?”

“Okay.”

Kathleen suddenly
smiles at me with a warm glow that makes me look away. “Thanks, Emalie.” And then she turns and starts back toward Dad, leaving me to carry the fifty-ton weight of everything I just heard all by myself.

I mean, wow.

I’ve been sitting down here in the basement tonight, flipping this little scarab beetle over in
my hand, wondering about everything. I think I even went a good five minutes not thinking about how much I miss Dean, or even how much I might miss him = it.

It’s exciting to have something new. That’s how Dad’s been acting too. I can’t wait for tomorrow, to use these powers of mine. (Come on, really? Do I really have powers??) Maybe I should be
scared or nervous, but I’m not. I’ve had enough of that lately.

January 4, 8:36 p.m.
Or maybe I should have been. Scared, that is.

I leave school as soon as the bell rings. I’ll have to walk fast to get to the address in time, which is easy now that I have, well, no one to slow me down. (Careful!
Dean trap!) It’s a thick, cloudy day, and there’s actually a warning for snow. That would be something. It barely ever snows in Seattle, and when it does, even just an inch can turn the world upside down.

The air is still, waiting, and wouldn’t you know, as soon as I step off the bus in downtown Ballard, thick flakes are zigzagging
their way to the pavement. The bus was actually on time today, which is like winning the lottery—it doesn’t happen very much—so I actually have time to stop in to Cupcake Royale and get a babycake. My favorite: white cake with chocolate frosting. Eat the frosting in one lick, then pop the little cake in your mouth and be all fat-cheeked like a chipmunk for a
minute, and always get noticed by some cute boy looking up from his iPod at just the wrong moment, but anyway…

Then I’m back outside and crossing over to Market and 22nd and it’s really coming down. There’s a tingle on my cheeks as the big flakes hit, but also in the air as everyone hunches and rushes. Do they feel the
excitement of snow? Or just how it messes up their day?

I get to the corner and car wheels are spraying slush. A woman passing me slips in her silly heels and goes down to her knee. Flakes on my shoulders. Flakes on my hat. Flakes on my striped gloves that don’t have fingertips. A gift from my grandma, BTW: no fingertips, that way you can text your friends in winter
comfort! Too bad poor little me doesn’t have a phone or any friends. Right now I just wish I had fingertips on my gloves.

But what poor little me does have is an ancient scarab charm…

I pull out the beetle and hold it in my fist. Then I check my wristwatch, the one I never wear because if I wear it I always check it, like time
is a drug or something. 3:16. I wait.


3:17. Okay. I hold up my hands, pressing the scarab between my palms. I try to clear my mind, but my mind is like that scrolling line across the bottom of the news channel: DEAN, OLIVER,
IT’S YOUR FAULT!... MOM, ORANI, PORTAL, YOU’RE A MONSTER!... DEAN...

Re. Lax. Emalie. Somehow, I do, and close my eyes, and put my lips up to my hands and blow between them...

And it’s hard to describe what happens next.

It’s like someone turns up the volume, but it’s
not the sounds of the cars or the slush that gets louder, it’s all whispering voices, everywhere, like I can hear everyone around this busy intersection, and my body is moving—no, I’m moving—my body is staying where it is, but I’m rushing through the whispers, across the street, among the snowflakes —

Then I stop. Now
there’s only one voice: “Can’t believe he didn’t like any of these gifts. Ungrateful brat. Why do kids have to become teenagers?”

I’m seeing the sidewalk on the other side of the street—walking out of Sonic Boom Records…

And I’m in someone else’s head. That’s the plain and simple truth. But it doesn’t feel plain or simple.
An older woman, walking along kinda bent over. “We should just save our money. If he doesn’t like anything he gets for Christmas, then why even have it?” You’d think I might be laughing at hearing this, but I’m not, because I’m not just hearing this woman’s thoughts; I’m feeling them. It’s like her emotions are mine too. I am suddenly filled with this sad, empty feeling.
It’s almost like something I’ve felt before, but darker, more sour. Like something that’s been left out in the rain and gotten all rusty—that’s what this woman’s disappointment feels like. I don’t like it. I want better for her, but I also want to get that feeling out of my heart—

And then I’m back out in the whispers. Gliding between the snowflakes, a
rush of wind and noise, then into another person—a man this time, by the mailbox, holding letters: “Just mail them, get it over with. Who cares if they’re two weeks late? No one will read them anyway. Nobody cares about you...Is it noon yet? Hattie’s should be open...” I’m swallowed up by his doubt, his shaking desire for the clear brown whisky in the
Back out and through the cold, the whispers seem like whipping winds, grabbing at me, into the next one—a small child: “Big cars, hold my hand, Mommy, carry me!” Her fear shakes me; the cars are big; they are scary—

Into the next one—a boy my age, walking very fast: “Can’t let them find me.
Can’t let them know. If I can just find Selene. But how? Have to hurry…”

Wait a minute. Selene? I’ve heard that name before. Could it possibly be a coincidence? For the first time, I want to stay for a minute—

But then I’m out again, rushing, this time into a dark, cramped mind. I find myself looking out through a
truck window. I’m in the driver’s head. The truck is approaching the intersection. I can even see me over on the corner, standing there like I’m in a trance. And then I hear this man’s thoughts: “There he is. That’s the one. Come on, Murray, all you have to do is make it look like an accident. The snow is the perfect excuse. Okay, he’s heading for the street. Gotta
time this perfectly…” I look out of his eyes and see that boy whose head I was just in. The one who made me want to stay.

This man’s mind is hot and crowded and dark, but suddenly, I am freezing cold. Because I know what’s about to happen. This truck driver is about to…

“No!” I scream with all my power. The truck
driver doesn’t hear me, but suddenly I am rushing back through the wind, into another head—my head. I’m back.

I’m woozy for a moment, eyes popping open, still blurry. I manage to drop the scarab back around my neck, thinking: Where’s the boy?!

There. He’s on the other side of the intersection.
Waiting for the WALK light. It blinks from red to white. The boy starts going into the crosswalk with some others, but he’s walking faster. He gets out ahead.

I turn to the left. The truck. It’s short and white, wipers pushing snow out of the way. Inside, the silhouette of the thick driver. The murderer. It’s not slowing down as it reaches the red
light. I can hear its engine roaring louder.

“Hey!” I shout into the street.

The boy has his chin tucked in the collar of his frayed brown coat. He’s hunched and hurrying. He doesn’t hear me. The truck rumbles right into the intersection.

I run. Leaping off the curb, slipping in the slush but

Finally, he looks up, sees me. His eyes go wide. Looking left, all I see is truck headlights and a wet metal grill.

Somewhere close by, a man shouts: “Hey look out!”

“What?” the boy says and then I am slamming into him, as hard as I can. Our
chins hit and pain floods my head, and we’re flying backward, stumbling and falling, and I think: You won’t get far enough... The truck will run you down—

But then we are crashing into a woman, tumbling and hitting the pavement.

“Ow! What are you __”

I hear the roar and
twist around. The truck is passing within inches of our feet. For a second, I see the driver staring out his window at us, scowling, confused. Then the truck speeds away.

“What are you doing?” the boy is gasping underneath me. I look down and see that his face—kinda cute—is inches from mine… and I roll off and to my feet as fast as I can.
He sits up, his jacket soaked. He has gloves with no fingers too, but that’s because his are old and torn. His hair is dark black. There are people crowding around us.

“Are you two okay?”

“That truck almost ran those kids down!”

He looks at me with wide brown eyes.

And I panic and get
out of there. The whole minute is catching up with me. I can barely breathe. My chin is killing me and I’m shivering all over. I push through the crowd and head for the sidewalk. I am just stepping out of the street, still breathing hard, when I hear: “Wait!” The boy grabs my arm. “Stop.”

I almost don’t, but then I do. We stare at each
other. I want to ask him why someone would be trying to kill him. I want to ask him about those thoughts he was having, but then it feels almost wrong to know his thoughts. And wouldn’t I sound crazy saying those things to him?

But then he has crazy things to say to me: “Do I know you?”

“No,” I reply, “Not
really...I, um...”

“You just saved my life, didn’t you?”

Like an idiot, all I can do is shrug. “Yeah.”

I’m not sure what I expect him to say, but it’s not what he says: “You’re the one who knows the vampire kid.”

The words freeze me. “What? You mean...” I lower my voice. “Oliver?”

“Yeah.”
“I—I don’t. I mean, not anymore. I—”

But now this boy is looking at me differently. He almost looks...worried. And he’s thinking hard.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Horacio,” he says.

“I’m Emalie,” I tell him, even though he doesn’t ask. “Who was trying to kill you just then?”
“I—I’m not sure. They’ve been after me since I had the vision. Every time I leave the house…”

“What vision?” I ask, but he’s still looking at me like I’m something weird. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I should go,” he says. “I have to keep looking.”

“You mean for Selene?” I ask, remembering
his thoughts. “Who is that anyway?”

But now I’ve done it, because Horacio is backing away from me, looking shocked. “How did you know that?”

“Sorry—I heard it… Heard you think it.”

He starts to respond and I figure he’ll say I’m crazy, but again, it’s more surprises: “You have to stay
with him.”

“Who?” I ask.

Horacio is reaching the crosswalk again. “The vampire.”


The light blinks to WALK. “Just, if you don’t, it’ll be your fault.”

“What will be?”

Horacio looks at me one last time, so worried.
“The end of the world,” he says, then rushes across the street. All I can do is stand there, letting him go, stuck with another five tons of confusion to sort out by myself.

January 22, 10:08 p.m.

Hey.

Haven’t been able to write in a while. I thought maybe I’d wait until I’d
figured out what happened in that intersection. What Horacio meant. Thought it would come to me and I’d fill page after page.

So far, it hasn’t.

But I have found some clues. Yesterday I was in the basement, not really sure what to do with myself or the confused thoughts in my head. I ended up pulling out the big box where my
mom’s photography equipment goes. My dad, the newly employed and shaven one, took my broken camera into a shop and found out it was ruined beyond repair. He says we can go shopping for another one, but I don’t know—I don’t even really want to. That camera started all this, from taking pictures of the places where vampires might live, all the way to being told,
by a boy whose life I had just saved, that the end of the world might be my fault. Like I didn’t have enough to feel responsible for.

Anyway, I started packing up the developer when I noticed this stack of notebooks in the box. Mom’s notebooks. They never interested me before, but the other night I pulled them out, and it turns out they’re full of
Orani notes and directions for how to do enchantments. There’s other stuff too: special candles, glass jars of different powders, some dried flowers. I don’t know what all of it is yet, but I’m going to find out.

I have been reading Mom’s notebooks for days now. I lie on the basement floor after dinner, making a warm spot with my belly on
the old yellow rug, flipping the pages...falling asleep, waking up again. I don’t notice when it gets dark.

I found notes on the conduit charm that Kathleen gave me. It lets you enter people’s heads to observe and feel what they feel. I guess the conduit will naturally seek out the strongest, most intense feelings in an area, and that’s what led me to
Horacio and his killer. A stronger Orani would have gotten right to him, but I’m not that skilled yet.

But the bigger question is: Did Kathleen know that I’d find that boy? She must have, right? She must have wanted me to save him. I won’t know until I talk to her again.

The other questions are: Who was Horacio? What
was this vision he was talking about? Who is this Selene that he was searching for? And what did he mean about me needing to stay with Oliver—that otherwise, the end of the world would be my fault? Stay with Oliver? Stay with it?

It doesn’t make any sense. Just like so much lately. I feel like my whole world has changed. But all I
can do is try to figure all this out one step at a time. And I have to start at the start... At Dean.

See, I found something else in this notebook. Something powerful, something I’m probably not ready for as a young Orani... Except, it’s something I can do to start solving all these questions. And something that might
make me feel better about what happened to Dean…

It’s time for a little payback.

I’ll keep an eye out for Horacio, but for now, whatever he was talking about will have to wait. I’ve got something else planned, and it’s going to keep me out long after dark…

More later.
Turn the page to continue reading from the Oliver Nocturne series
BOOK TWO
THE SUNLIGHT SLAYINGS

OLIVER NOCTURNE
KEVIN EMERSON
Chapter 1

Old Wounds

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU?”

Oliver froze. He was standing over the round stone sink in the center of the bathroom, running a humming, nano-diamond stiletto file over his teeth, as he always did right before
dinner. He glanced nervously across the room, to where his older brother, Bane, was drying his face with a burgundy towel.

“I—I—” Oliver stammered. What was wrong with him? How about the fact that he’d lost his friends Emalie and Dean? Or that he’d had to spend every night of this miserable last month and a half living a tangle of
lies, pretending he was fine around his parents, who were lying right back to him about his future, not to mention his past?

“Relax, lamb.” Bane scowled. “I don’t mean all the things that are wrong with you. I mean there.” He pointed at Oliver’s stomach.

Oliver looked down at his thin, shirtless torso. His skin was its normal pale grayish
color, and he would’ve known by the itching if he’d developed a mold rash, but he was shocked to find a purple wound on the left side of his abdomen, near his waist.

“Huh,” said Oliver. It was a short, bright-red cut surrounded by a deep-purple oval. A small spider’s web of crimson lines spread away from it.

“Looks like you got
stabbed,” Bane mused, “or maybe you lost a fight with a rat.”

“Shut up,” Oliver muttered. He hadn’t even noticed the wound before. Vampires were much less sensitive to pain than humans, and of course there were no mirrors in the house, but now that he focused on the spot, he did sense a faint, dull ache. He pulled at the skin,
separating the wound. Vampires didn’t bleed or get scabs, but now a bit of brown fluid dripped out. Oliver frowned at this. The fluid, the red spider lines … it all spelled infection. If his mother, Phlox, saw that, she’d be calling Dr. Vincent, and Oliver did not want to go back to the doctor.

During his last doctor’s visit, back in December,
Oliver had learned that his yearly checkups were not just to make sure he was healthy. He was also being prepared, without his knowledge, for a special but very secret purpose. Oliver had later learned in a vision where he met his future demon, Illisius, that he had a special destiny: to open something called the Nexia Gate and free the vampires from Earth, which
some thought of as a prison. Oliver had never heard of Nexia, or a Gate.

And it seemed that only Oliver’s parents, Dr. Vincent, and perhaps some others at his father’s employer, the Half-Light Consortium, knew about this plan. And while none of them had ever talked to him about it, back in December, they’d all been worried about Oliver because
of his sleeplessness, his anxieties, and most of all because of his human friends: Emalie and Dean.

Oliver had allegedly killed Dean, and all of that worry had turned to pride. His family had celebrated the occasion, and since then, they’d assumed he was fine and left him alone. He wasn’t fine, not even close, but at least since then, everyone
wasn’t worrying about him all the time. So, the last thing he wanted to do was take this wound to his Dr. Vincent and attract everyone’s attention again.

Oliver stuck his finger into the wound. He wiped away a bit of the fluid, and for a moment, glimpsed something dark red and solid-looking. Oliver dug his nail deeper—
Suddenly a searing, vampire-size pain stabbed through his body, causing his legs to buckle. Oliver toppled to the floor, smacking his head on the sink as he did so.

“Ha!” Bane spat. “Dork. Now you’re probably going to go cry to Mommy and get the celebrity treatment again.” Bane imitated Phlox: “Oh, my precious Oliver, my most favorite baby! We’ll drop
everything to help you!”

Oliver scrambled to a sitting position, wincing. It had been this way with Bane ever since Dean’s death. Bane couldn’t stand Oliver’s newfound fame, which made Oliver crazy, because Dean’s death was Bane’s fault! After all, it was Bane who had showed up with his friends at Emalie and Dean’s chorus practice—Bane who said he
was there to fix Oliver, who made him choose a human victim to bite, and who had brought that mysterious staff. Yet Oliver didn’t remember what had happened in the moments between when he’d pretended to attack Dean, in order to engineer an escape, and when he’d woken up sometime later in a classroom upstairs. According to Emalie, and Bane, Oliver had
killed Dean, and there was no doubt Dean was dead, but Oliver refused to believe he’d done it, even though he hadn’t been able to find any proof otherwise.

“‘I should drop that sink on you,’” Bane muttered. “‘That would really get Mom riled up.’” He gave Oliver a disgusted glance. “‘Enjoy the big fuss with your little injury.’” He stalked out.
Oliver watched him go. If someone had asked him back in December, when he was lying awake most days and wondering what was wrong with him, he would have said, for certain, that things could not have gotten any worse. Yet now, at the beginning of February, he was still having trouble sleeping, his brother disliked him even more, and though Dean’s death had
convinced his parents that he was fine, and had made the other vampire kids friendlier at school, it had also caused him to lose the only two friends he really wanted.

Oliver got to his feet and returned to the sink. He leaned back to let more light on the wound. This time he spread the skin wide, but didn’t try to reach inside, and for just a moment, he saw a
flash of crimson light, like the reflection from a crystal.

*It’s a shard,* he guessed, *from the amulet.* The amulet of Ephyra, given to him by Dead Désirée. She had claimed that the amulet was “for his protection,” but what it had really done was shatter, and deliver Oliver a vision of his past. In that vision he’d learned that, unlike every other vampire child, he had
been *sired*. He had been a human baby and was turned into a vampire. Vampire children were normally made from the genes of their parents and grown in a special lab. A child could not be sired, because he or she wouldn’t be strong enough to withstand the transformation. Yet according to that portal vision, Oliver *had* been, and his human parents had been
killed by his vampire parents. The fact that this wound in his side had been caused by the amulet was another reason why he couldn’t tell Phlox about it. While it had turned out that his parents had secretly known about his friendship with Emalie and Dean all along, Oliver was pretty sure that they hadn’t known about the amulet, nor about the vision it supplied.
Oliver wanted to keep it that way until he could find out more about his past.

It all felt complicated, and complicated was not something that vampires were supposed to have to deal with.

Oliver looked around the bathroom for something that he could use to extract the crystal splinter. The shard didn’t look that big, but it was
very deep inside the wound. He considered his stiletto for a moment, but it would probably just push the shard deeper again, and that pain had been brutal. He needed long tweezers, or pliers….

“Ollie!” It was Phlox, calling from upstairs. “Can you come up here?”

Oliver slipped on his T-shirt, wincing at the lingering pain. He headed back to the
crypt where he and his family slept, he and Bane in their own coffins, Phlox and Sebastian in their double-wide model. He threw on sneakers and his dark gray hoodie sweatshirt.

He was halfway up the stone spiral staircase, lit by globes of molten magmalight, when he noticed a strange smell. It was something like cayenne pepper ... and sage
... and also rot. This wasn’t the first time Oliver had smelled it around the house. Maybe it was some new cologne that Bane was trying out. He wrinkled his nose. Spices and decay could often smell good, but this combination didn’t. As quickly as it had come over him, the smell faded, and yet, how many times in these last couple weeks had he smelled
that? Hard to say. Three? Four?

Oliver entered the kitchen to find everything busy. The dishwasher was grumbling, the forge humming. His family was bustling as well—\textit{NOT my real family!} a voice shouted inside—and Oliver felt a familiar surge of anxiety in his gut. He took a deep breath and tried to make his face look calm and
unbothered. He’d been practicing this a lot lately.

Sebastian was on the far side of the kitchen island, knotting a wide tie and stuffing it into his black suit vest. Bane was by the sink, bleaching a new streak of white into his black, shaggy hair. Phlox, wearing a shimmering silver dress and black overcoat, was carefully putting on her earrings, which
were sapphires held within tiny rat skeleton claws.

“Now that we have the egg whites whipped …” said a smooth voice. Oliver glanced over to find Clarise Clyne, star of *Confections with Clarise*, a popular show on a human food channel, on the plasma screen over the sink. She smiled a tight-lipped smile that hid the points of her teeth as she
addressed the camera: “... we’re going to add the raspberry sauce.” She produced a glass bowl of a dark crimson sauce that was steaming hot. “Of course, it doesn’t have to be raspberries,” she cooed at the camera with a knowing gleam in her eye. “It could be cherries, or anything else you’re ... fond of.” Vampires knew what she meant.
Oliver sat on a stool at the center island. The forge timer began beeping. “Oh, good.” Phlox grabbed a thick oven mitt and removed a steaming iron plate. “Here we are,” she announced, sliding the dish to Oliver. She spun quickly back to the counter, then froze. “Honey,” she said to Sebastian, “have you seen the cayenne?” Oliver perked up,
watching Phlox scan the black stone countertops. “I swear it was here an hour ago,” she mumbled. It was not like Phlox to lose track of anything, and this was not the first item to go missing in the last few days. Earlier in the week, Phlox had been looking for a bag of frozen Gila monster heads. Also, Sebastian had been complaining that his razor
had disappeared. And worst of all, Oliver had lost something very dear and secret to him, something that he’d been keeping in one of the drawers underneath his coffin."

“Haven’t seen it,” said Sebastian, checking his pocket watch, “but we need to go.”

“Oh, well,” Phlox sighed. “Sorry, Ollie, there’s no
cayenne.” She popped open the long, sleek refrigerator mounted along the top of the wall. Its door yawned upward with a hiss, revealing orderly racks of blood bags. “What would you like to drink?” she asked. “Pig?”

“Sure,” Oliver replied.

“Sorry we can’t take you along, Ollie,” said Sebastian, smiling warmly. “I know everyone would love to see
you, and as we know, you could probably handle yourself just fine. It would also save my colleagues from hearing my bragging tales about you again.”

“Tsss,” Bane hissed.

“Charles,” Phlox warned, using Bane’s real name as her hazel eyes flashed turquoise.

“But technically you’re still too young,” Sebastian explained, “so you’ll have to
wait like every other kid.”

Oliver nodded, making sure he looked disappointed. Really, going to one of the Friday Socials was about the last thing he wanted to do. Everyone dressed up formally and met in the sewers. It was a big night for teens who had their demons, as well as adults. After some leisurely socializing (there were bartenders who set up stands
in the sewers), the vampires would head up to the surface, to a large human gathering that had been chosen in advance, usually an all-night rave or a house party. Because the humans had been partying, they would be largely unaware. There would be some chaos, but once the humans were subdued, the vampires could feed fairly leisurely.
At the most elite gatherings, the humans were actually put into Staesys, freezing them in time, and then bartenders would draw the blood for the guests. Regardless of whether the humans were placed in Staesys or were simply out of it due to their own abuses, the New World vampire code remained constant: Humans were rarely killed. They
would simply wake up feeling weak the next day, and maybe a little sick, which they would think was their own doing. They might find a strange cream substance on their neck, but the bite marks beneath would already be almost gone.... Oliver was supposed to be looking forward to going to the Socials once he got his demon, but right now he was
more than fine with staying home.

“"I hope we’ll find you asleep when we get back,”” Phlox said, kissing Oliver’s head affectionately. “"Maybe you’ll have another dream tonight,”” she added hopefully, referring to the demon dreams, in which a young vampire got to know the demon that would soon come to inhabit him in adulthood.
Back in December, Oliver had told everyone that he was having those dreams to hide why he was having trouble sleeping. That lie had become the truth when he met Illisius. But he hadn’t had another dream with Illisius since.

Sebastian ruffled Oliver’s hair as he headed for the stairs. “Good morning, son.”

“See ya.”

Oliver listened as the
heavy door to the sewers thudded shut. He dug into his dinner of Guatemalan Sepulcrit casserole (layers of brownie and fiery habanero peppers, a blood-and-cocoa mole sauce in between), then gulped down his goblet.

When he was sure that his family was gone for good, he slid off his chair and headed upstairs. He arrived at a steel door and pressed a red button.
The door slid open silently. As it did, Oliver reached up into a hollow in the bare wall above the door. He felt around until his fingers found a power cord, which he pulled from a socket. This disabled the security cameras that had given Oliver away to his parents back in December. If only he’d mistrusted them before and thought to look for cameras, he might still have
Emalie and Dean.

Oliver slipped around the carcass of an old human refrigerator and into the decrepit surface floor of an abandoned house. This house sat directly above the Nocturnes’ underground home, concealing it from humans. He concentrated on the presence of the forces around him, then climbed up the wall. As he did so, he felt
a dull ache in his side. He must have really aggravated that wound before. With each reach of his left arm, there was a pulse of pain. Still, he was able to move onto the ceiling and crawl to the center of the room, stopping beside a broken chandelier that hung crookedly. He flipped over and laid up against the ceiling, gazing down at the room below.
He waited and listened, but there was no sound in the dingy room except for the steady plinking of water, dripping from the ceiling into a murky bathtub in the corner. He could hear the echoes of cars through the broken windows, their tires churning in the steady rain. Now the light footwork of a rat behind one of the walls …

*SHE’S NOT COMING BACK,*
stupid, Oliver scolded himself. She hasn’t yet, and she won’t. But he knew that, didn’t he? Emalie thought Oliver was a killer. “How could you, Oliver?” That was the last thing she’d said to him.

But she left me that article. The one that detailed his parents’ death—They named me Nathan—and his abduction, long ago. If she
thought about me enough to find me that article, then maybe, when enough time goes by, she’ll come back.

But she hadn’t yet.

Two weeks, Oliver recalled. He’d only known Emalie and Dean for two weeks. In a vampire’s existence, even one only sixty-four human years long like Oliver’s, two weeks was still a blink of an eye. So how
could he even call them friends?

*It was how she treated me,* he thought. It had been so easy to be around Emalie. Things just *were,* around her. She’d been interested, rarely disappointed, and never worried about him, as he was used to feeling from others. Oliver had sensed something sad in her, too. Her mom had left without a trace two years
ago. Her dad hadn’t gotten over it. Emalie had to switch schools often, as they moved from one temporary apartment to another. Despite all that, she’d radiated this hopeful feeling. It was like she woke up every day still convinced that the world was somehow this amazing place, even though it kept letting her down.

Oliver hadn’t felt all this
about Emalie in those brief two weeks—these thoughts had taken lots of hours, alone in this room, to put together. Really, it all just boiled down to an embarrassing thought: He missed her. *If any of them could hear that thought …* Oliver mused. Pick anyone from the vampire world: They would think he was hopeless.

Suddenly, a sound broke
into Oliver’s thoughts.

Footsteps.

From where? Oliver glanced to the refrigerator, to the window—

The door. Someone was coming. *Is she back?*

Just then, Oliver caught that overpowering scent of cayenne, sage, and rot that he’d smelled on the stairs.…

The door creaked open.
A FIGURE PEERED WARILY around the door, then stepped in. The smell was overwhelming, but beneath it, Oliver picked up some faint characteristics: male, and undoubtedly dead in some manner. He was tall, narrow,
wearing a long coat and a black sweatshirt with the hood up over his head. He moved warily around the bottomless hole directly in front of the door, apparently not recognizing that it was really just a design trick to scare hapless humans. The actual hole was only a foot deep.

Getting past that, the figure trudged over to the
bathtub. He knelt in front of it and started scrubbing at his hands. Oliver saw long, filthy fingernails, and the brown tub water wasn’t helping. The figure looked at them and sighed. The sound was miserable.

He scrubbed a little more, then slapped at the water in frustration. Spinning away from the tub, he shuffled on his knees toward the wall.
The figure sat down on a pile of moldy clothes, folding his long legs and then rummaging around in his coat.

Oliver crept across the ceiling to get a closer look. What had this creature been doing in his house? Now he pulled something from his coat. Oliver saw that it was a squirrel. A meal, he guessed, but the figure just gazed
down at the animal’s lifeless black eyes. Oliver thought he even heard a sniffle.

More rummaging in the coat, and now there was a dull flash of metal, a familiar whiff of musk—there was Sebastian’s razor. What the figure attempted to do next made Oliver wrinkle his nose with pity. He seemed to be trying to skin the animal, but a razor was no match for hide
and fur. It didn’t go well. After a minute, he groaned in failure and hurled the razor across the room. It skittered into the shadows.

“Gah!” he growled, and hurled the squirrel as well. He started digging around in his coat again, this time producing a bag of tennis-ball-sized objects. He pulled one out. Oliver recognized the Gila monster heads taken
from their refrigerator. There was a splintering crack as the figure broke open the skull to scoop out the insides. He tossed the skull aside, stuffed the bag back in his coat, then rummaged some more. Oliver wondered what he would pull out next—

And then he saw it.

In the figure’s blotchy, grimy hand was a crumpled piece of newspaper. Oliver
recognized it, because it was the secret item that he had been missing: a carefully clipped newspaper article, but not the one about his kidnapping that Emalie had given him. This one was more recent.

“That’s mine,” Oliver hissed through the gloom.

“Whu—” The figure glanced up and spied Oliver. Their eyes locked, and Oliver
couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“Dean!”

For a moment, Dean looked like he might run, but then he croaked: “Hi, Oliver.”

Oliver dropped to the floor. “Hey.” This was amazing! Dean, back from the grave. Oliver offered him a smile, his anger forgotten. “It’s okay.”

Dean looked sheepishly at
him, then down at his own hands, at the blotchy, pale-and-purple skin, at the filthy long nails. When he spoke, it was barely a whisper: “What happened to me?”

“Well …” Oliver replied. “I’m pretty sure you’re a zombie.”

“Zombie,” Dean repeated, and he almost chuckled. “Yeah, that sounds about right. So, I’m really still
dead?"

“Yeah,” Oliver replied, “undead, really. You know, dead, but—not.”

Dean sighed. “I knew it.” Oliver wondered what to say. Dean didn’t sound too happy about this. Oliver thought about pointing out that, really, it was an improvement over being just dead. Then again, maybe Dean was missing being
alive. Oliver could kind of relate to that.

“Come on,” said Oliver, patting Dean on the shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.”

“All right.”

They ducked out the front door and walked down Twilight Lane, through the rain-swept dark.

“How long have you been back?” Oliver asked.

“About two weeks, I
think,” Dean mumbled, his head hung low.

They headed steadily downhill until they reached the canal.

“Want to stop here?” Oliver asked.

“Sure.”

They sat on the grass, a high bridge arcing above them. Out on the black water, a long sailboat cruised by, lit with strings of golden lights.
Warm silhouettes frolicked on the deck, laughing and talking.

“How did I die?” Dean asked quietly, staring into space.

“Don’t you ... remember?” Oliver asked tentatively.

“Not really.” Dean’s brow worked. “I remember we were at school. You were there, after chorus practice, I
... Then it’s all blank, until I woke up in my—” His voice got quiet. “In my coffin.”

Oliver couldn’t help feeling a wave of relief. The truth of how Dean died was still a mystery, but at least Dean didn’t think Oliver did it, like Emalie did. And Oliver didn’t plan on changing that. “You were killed by a vampire,” Oliver
said carefully. “My brother, or maybe one of his friends, I’m pretty sure…. I got knocked out in the craziness. I— I don’t know exactly how it happened, either,” Oliver finished. Nice job, he thought darkly. I managed not to lie, sort of.

“Huh,” said Dean.

Oliver hoped he wouldn’t ask why he’d been killed. That would be a longer trip
around the truth, or would Oliver just say: *You were killed because of me?*

Luckily, Dean didn’t ask. “I had to dig my way out,” he muttered, looking at his hands again. “I can’t get the dirt off.”

Oliver wondered at this. Vampire children didn’t have to dig out of graves since they were born in labs. Sired vampires did, but Phlox and
Sebastian had probably just buried Oliver lightly somewhere, maybe even in the house, since he had been so small. Still, a vampire would never sound upset about this kind of thing, like Dean did, but zombies didn’t have the awareness that vampires had.

Most vampires, once they felt the power of the forces around them, thought of
being undead as an improvement. Though zombies could use the forces, too, they didn’t have that higher sense of the universe, of the many parallel worlds that mingled with this one. And zombies weren’t inhabited by demons. Vampires used these reasons, and zombies’ typically awful smell, as excuses to look down on them. They weren’t
allowed into vampire establishments unless as servants, and even then, as Oliver had seen in the Underground, it was frowned upon. Usually they were used at home, or in war. Some particularly powerful vampires had raised entire armies of zombies, or housekeeping staffs and gardeners and such. They made excellent help because
they were mystically bonded to the will of their master—

   Wait a minute. “Dean,” Oliver began, “who raised you?”

   “What?” Dean looked up quizzically.

   “Do you know who your master is?”

   Dean just stared at him. “You mean somebody brought me back like this on purpose?”
“Well, yeah.”

Dean looked down at his hands again and chuckled darkly. “I don’t know.”

Oliver felt a tremor of worry. He was pretty sure that, normally, a master would have immediately identified himself to his zombie servant. There would be no reason to let a zombie just wander around when he could be getting to work.
Unless, Oliver thought, the master didn’t want the zombie, or anybody else, to know his identity. Could a master control a zombie from afar? Oliver would need to find out. Was Dean being controlled right now? Oliver glanced at Dean warily. It didn’t seem like it.…

“Who,” said Dean, “would do this?”

“Well, it’s probably one
of your relatives or something.” Oliver tried to sound upbeat. He wasn’t feeling that way inside, but until he could find out more about the master-zombie relationship, it seemed like he should try to help Dean adjust, rather than freak him out more. “I mean, maybe they’re waiting for the right time to tell you, so you’re not overwhelmed.”
“Mmm,” Dean grunted. Oliver decided to leave the topic. Dean seemed unhappy enough. Telling him that he was likely somebody’s servant probably hadn’t helped. “You have some supernatural powers now,” Oliver offered, trying to cheer him up. “You can probably jump farther and stuff.” In the brief time Oliver had known the living Dean,
he had seemed like a hard-luck kid. Not so coordinated, kind of scared of things—maybe being a zombie would be better for him.

“Guess,” Dean muttered.

“There’s other cool zombie stuff, too,” Oliver added. “Um ... fire doesn’t hurt you, and you’ll never die.”

“I just did.”

“Well, yeah, but ... you
know what I mean. Zombies are even more eternal than vampires.” Oliver stopped there, deciding not to mention that zombies could easily be destroyed by having their heads chopped off or being dropped into a vat of salt, or the more disturbing fact that because of all the skin decay and bacterial problems that zombies usually had, the older ones ended up as
merely skeletons.

“I can get you something to clean your hands,” Oliver said instead. Most of what was on Dean’s hands wasn’t actually dirt but mold and bacterial blooms. Vampires had products for that. And there were creams for hiding skin rot, though nothing truly strong enough for zombies, who got it way worse.

“Thanks,” Dean said.
Oliver tried to think of what else to say. “You’ve done a good job with the smell.”

“Oh, thanks.” Dean almost smiled. “Yeah, that’s my mom. She’s obsessed with that.”

Oliver was surprised by this. “Your parents know you’re back?”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “I mean, where else was I
supposed to go after I dug out?”

“Well …” Oliver was pretty sure that most zombies would have gone straight downtown and found other zombies to live with. Zombies tended to dwell in large pods, usually in abandoned tunnels or warehouses, though Oliver had heard that there was a particularly large pod beneath
the Seahawks stadium. Zombies were huge fans of rough sports like American football and pro wrestling, which vampires had little interest in.

“My parents were a little freaked out at first,” Dean said matter-of-factly. “My brother was okay with it, my sister not so much … but my dad tried to kill me with a pitchfork.” He rubbed his
shoulder. “That hurt.”

“Ouch,” Oliver agreed.

Dean huffed. “I know, right? My mom just screamed and cried for a couple days, but now they’re kind of coming around.”

“That’s nice,” said Oliver. “It’s nice that you have them.”

“Yeah,” Dean agreed. “Mom’s been all about helping me mask the smell,
and she’s done a ton of research, you know, on things like sand baths, so my skin decay doesn’t get worse. And she’s been trying, with the meals. She buys whole animals now, so I can have the …”

“Brains,” Oliver finished.

“Yeah.” Dean sighed.

“And organs, too. Raw. She’s getting all into which kinds are the healthiest.”
“My mom’s like that about healthy eating, too.”

Dean sighed. “Thing is, she’s not very good at preparing them, yet, so …”

“So,” Oliver guessed, “you’ve been getting food from our place.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” said Oliver. “On the bright side, I guess we can hang out more.”

Dean offered Oliver a hopeful
“Yeah,” Oliver agreed. "How’s that going to look?" he wondered. From hanging out with humans to hanging out with zombies. Yet he had gotten Dean killed—maybe it was the least he could do. And he didn’t really have anyone else he wanted to hang out with these days. "But shouldn’t you be hanging out with other
“Zombies?” Oliver asked.

“Oh, yeah.” Dean’s face fell. “Them. I don’t know. I mean, my parents let me go out at night. They want me to make some friends, but …”

“You’ve been coming to my house instead,” Oliver finished.

“Yeah. I didn’t know where else I could go and just, you know, be. Oh …” Dean rummaged in his coat
and produced the newspaper clipping. “I’m sorry I took this,” he said, handing it back to Oliver. “I just liked the picture.” It was Dean’s obituary, with his smiling school photo above it.

Silence passed over them. Oliver looked up and spied a bat weaving among the bridge rafters.

“Now I guess we just have to get Emalie to quit
school and start staying up all night, right?” Dean said, again with that hopeful tone.

Oliver halted. “Um, does she—does she know you’re back?”

Dean sighed. “No. I was thinking once I’d talked to you that maybe it would be easier if we went together. That way you could help her understand that I’m not dangerous?”
“Mmm …” ’cause she’d really trust me on that subject, thought Oliver.

“We should go see her now,” said Dean enthusiastically. “It’s almost dawn. We could wake her up and—”

“Ooh, um, let’s wait,” Oliver interrupted, his thoughts racing. “I haven’t actually seen her since you died.”
“Really? Why not?”
“Well …” Oliver wondered what to say next.
“She was pretty upset about losing you. She didn’t really want to see anyone. I’ve been trying to give her space.”
“But now I’m back!” Dean’s eyes lit up. “Come on, let’s just go spring it on her. She’ll probably think it’s cool!”

Oliver was so tempted by
the idea. “How about,” he said carefully, “we go check in on her first, you know, see how she’s doing? And wait until she looks like she’s in a really good mood. ’cause, you know, it’s a lot to take, meeting a zombie, even if it’s you.”

“You mean spy on her?” Dean eyed Oliver sideways.

“W-well—” Oliver stammered. “Not really
spying. More just watching —"

But Dean just shrugged. “Sure,” he said. “Sounds like a plan.” The idea might have bothered a human, but not a zombie, even a reluctant one. “How about tomorrow night?”

Oliver felt a surge of excitement and worry at once. “All right.”

They sat for another
minute.

“Hey, check it out,” Dean said finally.

Oliver followed his pointing arm toward Capitol Hill, to the east. The sky was shading from black to gray.

“Time for bed, for us nocturnal creatures,” Dean said almost happily, patting Oliver on the back. “Hey, your name: Nocturne. I get that now.”
Oliver nodded, feeling awkward and yet fine. This was fine. Zombie Dean....

They stood up. “So,” said Dean, “see you tomorrow night?”

“Yeah,” said Oliver. “See ya.” He started home, then turned and watched Dean stalk off into the shadows. Dean was back. The only question was: Why?
Chapter 3

Stalking

EARLY THE NEXT EVENING, Oliver awoke with a start, a strange dream fresh in his mind. He was with Dean and Emalie, walking down the school halls. Dean was a zombie. It was one of those weird, jumbled dream worlds.
around them. The spray-painted neon grotesquas were glowing on the walls, but sunlight that seemed too red streamed in through the windows. And the floor was made of grass. Standing on either side of them were Oliver’s classmates, leering silently. Despite that, Oliver, Emalie, and Dean were joking around, until they reached the door to the gym.
Dean reached forward and pushed it open. “I’m going to find out, you know,” he said to Oliver with a smile.

Inside, they found everyone else from the night of Dean’s death, standing frozen in place. The kids were huddled together. The Emalie and Dean from that night were with them. Bane and his friends Ty and
Randall were there, too.

“Everyone, take your places,” said the Emalie standing with Oliver. She was dressed in black and seemed to be standing in a shadow. Oliver couldn’t tell where it was coming from. It was like the lights had been dimmed, but only around her.

“Come on, Oliver,” Dean said, lying down on the floor. Suddenly the dream
blurred and Oliver was about to bite Dean, his face inches away from Dean’s neck. Oliver could hear the blood pumping—“Oliver, no!” Dean screamed, just like he had that night.

Oliver struggled to look to the door, where Bane’s friend Randall was keeping guard. “No!” Oliver shouted. “Just hold on! I don’t kill you, that’s not what happens!”
Oliver even heard the echoing, ancient voice of Illisius in his head: “Oliver, don’t fight it, my boy. It’s time….”

But then Emalie shouted: “Freeze it right there!”

Things blurred again, and Oliver found himself suspended in midair above the scene, except his body was also below, still on top of Dean.
“Where are you going?” Emalie asked. She was gazing up at him, annoyed.

“To Nexia,” Oliver said calmly. He saw that the ceiling had been replaced by a pure black sky with liquid constellations and huge planets.

“Have a nice trip!” Dean called, waving, no longer upset.

“No,” Emalie said sternly.
She had her arms out in front of her, and almost looked like she was pressing against the air. “It’s right here,” she said, grimacing. “There’s something … but I can’t … What are you?” she shouted into space. As she did so, that dark shadow seemed to wrap around her again, like a cloud or something was clinging to her, but it was like she didn’t notice it.
“Oliver, check it out,” Dean called. “You killed me.” Oliver looked down to find Dean lying on the floor alone. His neck had two red holes. Blood seeped across the floor.

“No!” Oliver shouted. “I didn’t do that!”

Emalie looked up at him darkly. “Yes you did. You do it every time. We all see it.”

Oliver looked around to find every other person in the
room staring at him coldly. “No!” he shouted.

“No!”

Oliver’s eyes snapped open. He was in his coffin. There was no starry sky overhead, just the white satin fabric of his lid. He looked down to see that he’d tossed and turned himself out of his sleeping soil, but his shivers weren’t coming from the cold …
It only took a moment to realize that sleep wasn’t returning anytime soon. He listened, and when he heard only silence, he reached to the side of his coffin and grasped a polished wooden handle. The bolts that kept his coffin lid locked slid open with a series of quiet clicks.

All coffins still locked from the inside, since vampires usually slept
deeply, and the daylight hours had traditionally been the best time for humans to stake them. This rarely if ever happened anymore, but coffins were still sold based not just on comfort (features like soil humidity regulation, satin interior thread count) but also safety (triple-bolt locks, fire-resistant finishes, garlic-proof odor seals). Oliver and his family had
Morlock
Tempurpedic coffins, from the SlumberStill series. The next line up, the HomeMausoleum, even had video surveillance and wireless servant-summoning technology. Oliver’s coffin was the last junior size, and it did still have a hidden unlock button, which Phlox sometimes used if Oliver overslept, something that is
likely to happen if you often don’t fall asleep until it’s nearly time to get up.

Oliver’s lid quietly yawned open. He sat up, brushing a last bit of warm sleeping soil off his legs, then hopped down to the stone floor. Phlox and Sebastian’s coffin was silent beside his, Bane’s as well beyond that.

The crypt was barely lit by tiny crimson magmalight
night-lights at the base of each wall.

Oliver turned and knelt. His coffin was at waist height. Beneath it were two rows of dresser drawers. He opened the bottom one and rummaged through his school uniform shirts until his hands closed on a small object. It was a jewelry box made of ivory, its edges lined with pewter. Sebastian had once
given Phlox a necklace in it. Oliver flipped open the box. Inside was a jumbled little trio of objects. Oliver brushed them out into an orderly row: the teardrop earring, the green hair elastic, and the crumpled note. They still smelled faintly of Emalie.

He had to find a way to prove that he hadn’t killed Dean.... *Unless I really did,* he thought worriedly. That
dream had made it seem like he really had. And what could he do now, anyway? Weeks ago, he’d searched through Bane’s drawers and found no trace of that turquoise orb that he’d had with him that night. What other evidence was there? It seemed to be just his word against everyone else’s.

He climbed back into his coffin, and much later the endless Saturday was finally
through. Oliver trudged upstairs for breakfast. Bane was still asleep and Sebastian was gone. Phlox was on the phone when he entered the kitchen.

“I see. Well, I’ll say that’s strange. No— Francyne, no. You should stay home. I can get down there. It’s no problem.”

Oliver sat at the kitchen island and found a goblet
waiting for him, along with a pill of crushed herbs. He scowled at the pill, but forced it down as usual.

“All right,” Phlox continued, “I’ll let you know what I find out. Mm-bye.” She hung up.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Oh.” Phlox almost jumped. “Oliver, I didn’t hear you come up.”

“Sorry.”
“No, that’s all right.” Phlox glanced distractedly around the kitchen. “Listen, I have to go out for a bit. That was Francyne on the phone. I’ll be back maybe around midnight.”

“Okay.” Oliver noted the worry in Phlox’s voice. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, it’s—it’s nothing to worry about, just a quick meeting of Central
Council.” She hurried about, filling her shoulder bag.

“Sounds serious,” said Oliver.

“Yeah, well, gotta run.” Phlox rushed toward the stairs. “Your father’s at work all night, so …” She looked back at him, her brow furrowing with concern. “You don’t have any plans to leave, do you?”

“Nah,” Oliver lied.
“Okay, that’s good.” Surprisingly, she left it at that and disappeared down the stairs.

Oliver drained his goblet. He was glad that whatever was worrying Phlox wasn’t him for once. Still, his mom wasn’t the biggest fan of Central Council, the main body of vampire government in the city. She often said that she couldn’t wait to end her
term as eighth district liaison. So it was definitely strange to see her rushing out on a Saturday.

But it made Oliver’s life easier, as he immediately left for Emalie’s before Bane woke up.

He headed across town through a light rain. The city was dreary and dark. The holiday lights were long gone, and it had rained at
least a little for something like thirty straight days. That kind of thing was always hard on the humans. They started acting strange, desperate, some even jumping off bridges. Oliver could hear them carousing now, an extra-crazed edge to their voices, as he passed a row of bars. Neon signs lit the raindrops and leafless trees. As he walked, his
thoughts returned to that strange dream. What kept bothering Oliver was the way that Emalie seemed to be controlling the action. If dreams were supposed to be your subconscious telling you something, then what did that mean? It didn’t make sense.

He emerged from his thoughts as he reached Emalie’s house. Nervousness surged through him. It had
been very hard not to come here before now. The last five weeks, Oliver had thought about it every night, but had kept reminding himself: *She doesn’t want to see me. She thinks I’m a monster.* Yet here he was.

A quiet, scraping sound broke the silence. Oliver turned to find Dean stepping out of the shadows. He was holding a chicken bone and
grinding it down with his teeth. Bones, especially the marrow, were a normal part of a zombie’s diet. Oliver remembered walking by an entire pod grinding like that in the Underground, and the sound had been deafening.

“Hey,” said Oliver.

Dean nodded. He glanced warily up at the little house. “Maybe she’s already asleep.” He sounded almost
hopeful.

Oliver led the way up the brick steps of the walkway through the overgrown yard. The front porch was dark. A light shone weakly from the living room. Oliver wondered how Emalie’s dad was doing. The few times Oliver had ever seen him, he hadn’t looked well. And he’d been talking to Margie, Emalie’s mother, as if she were in the
house.
The single upstairs window was also dark. Emalie’s room. He could still picture himself lying on her floor, the night before Dean had died, when he had been on the run. There was so much that Oliver had found out in those days before Longest Night, yet it had almost seemed like a dream in the weeks since, when
there had been nothing else to do except get back to existence as usual. But now, being here, he remembered the feeling: knowing that his parents, his vampire parents, had been lying to him about his whole life (Aren’t they still? he reminded himself). He’d felt safe in Emalie’s room that night. Normal. He’d actually slept well on her floor.
“Let’s check the basement.” Dean was stepping past Oliver with surprising decisiveness. Oliver followed him around the house to the small ground-level window. Red light spilled from it. They peered in carefully, but found Emalie’s darkroom area empty. There were no photo supplies out, no trays of chemicals in the sink, nor
photos hanging up. Oliver remembered now that Emalie’s camera had gotten damaged in the Underground. There was only a stack of books on the floor. They looked old, their bindings frayed. A beat-up spiral notebook was lying open on top of the pile.

“Maybe she’s in the kitchen,” Dean whispered, starting toward the back of
the house.

Oliver lingered, looking in at the darkroom space, its walls still made of unpacked boxes. Almost as if on cue, his side ached. It had been on that concrete floor that the amulet had shattered and showed him his true parents. He remembered the portal vision now with a rush of sadness—remembered Emalie in it with him, sensed
her scent there—

Wait, no, her scent wasn’t in the vision. It was here now.

“Dean!” Dean was just reaching the corner of the house when Oliver grabbed him by the shoulders and lunged forward. They flew up over a van parked in the back alley. As they landed, Oliver pushed Dean to the ground.

“Ow! What the—”

“Tssss,” Oliver hissed
quietly.

Just then, the basement door of Emalie’s house squealed. Watching through the narrow space beneath the van, they saw Emalie emerge. She was wearing a black wool sweater and a black knit hat, and had a backpack slung over her shoulder. She crept away from the house and stole off down the alley.

“What’s she doing?”
Dean asked as they watched her go.

“Come on,” Oliver said and started off after her.

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About the Author

Kevin Emerson once competed in a beauty pageant and lost (probably because he was wearing a suit of armor). He is the author of twelve novels for teen and middle grade readers, including the Atlanteans series, the Exile series, and The Fellowship for Alien Detection. He is also a guitarist and drummer in two
bands: Northern Allies and the Board of Education. Emerson once appeared in a Swedish television commercial, knows that bow ties are cool, and also knows that Pinkie Pie is the best MLP. He lives with his wife and two young children in Seattle, where the damp, gloomy nights inspired Oliver’s story.
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BOOK TWO

THE SUNLIGHT SLAYINGS

OLIVER NOCTURNE

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