

THE CHRONICLES OF

Vladimir Vod

NINTH GRADE

Slays

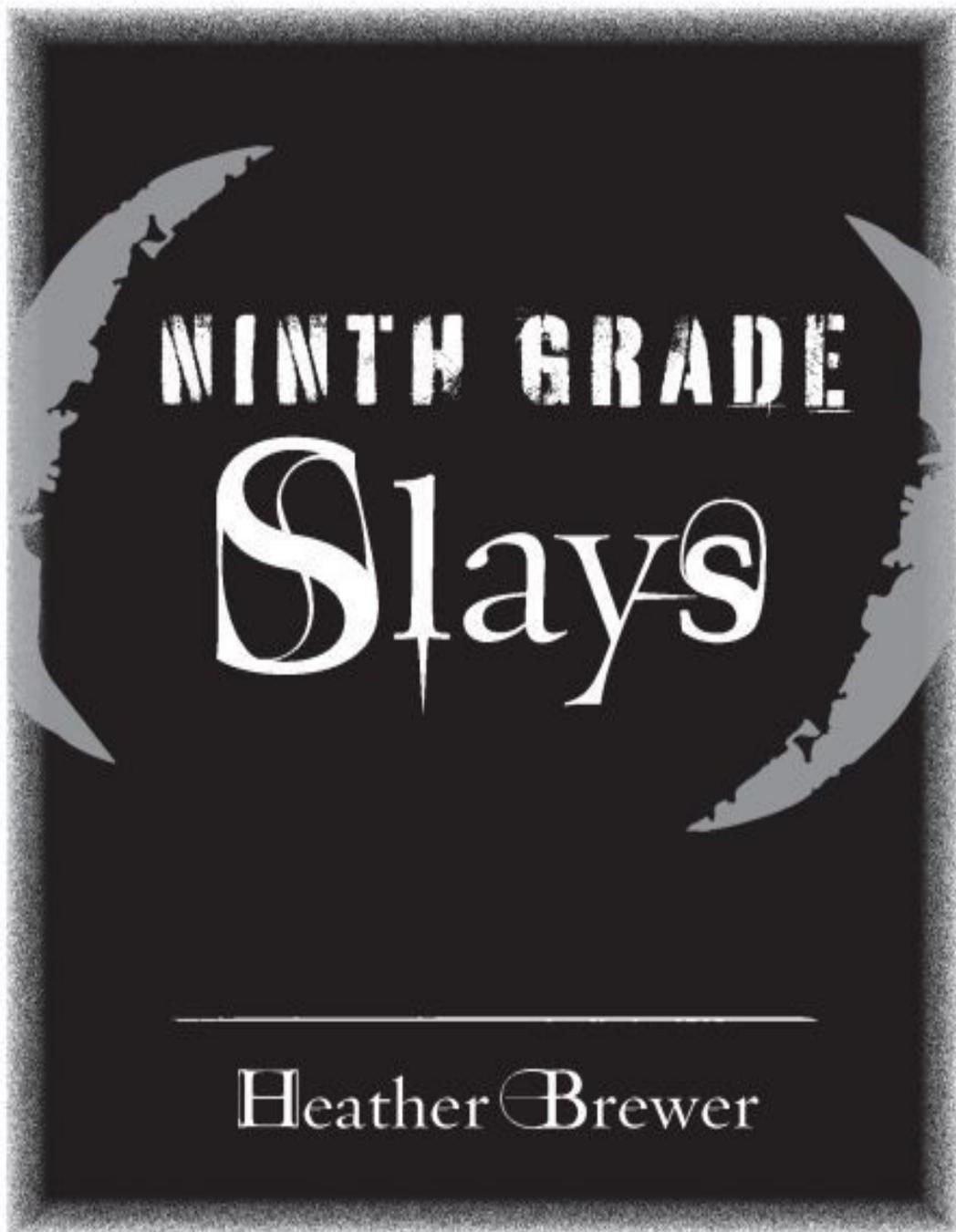
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Heather Brewer

> DUTTON CHILDREN'S BOOKS <



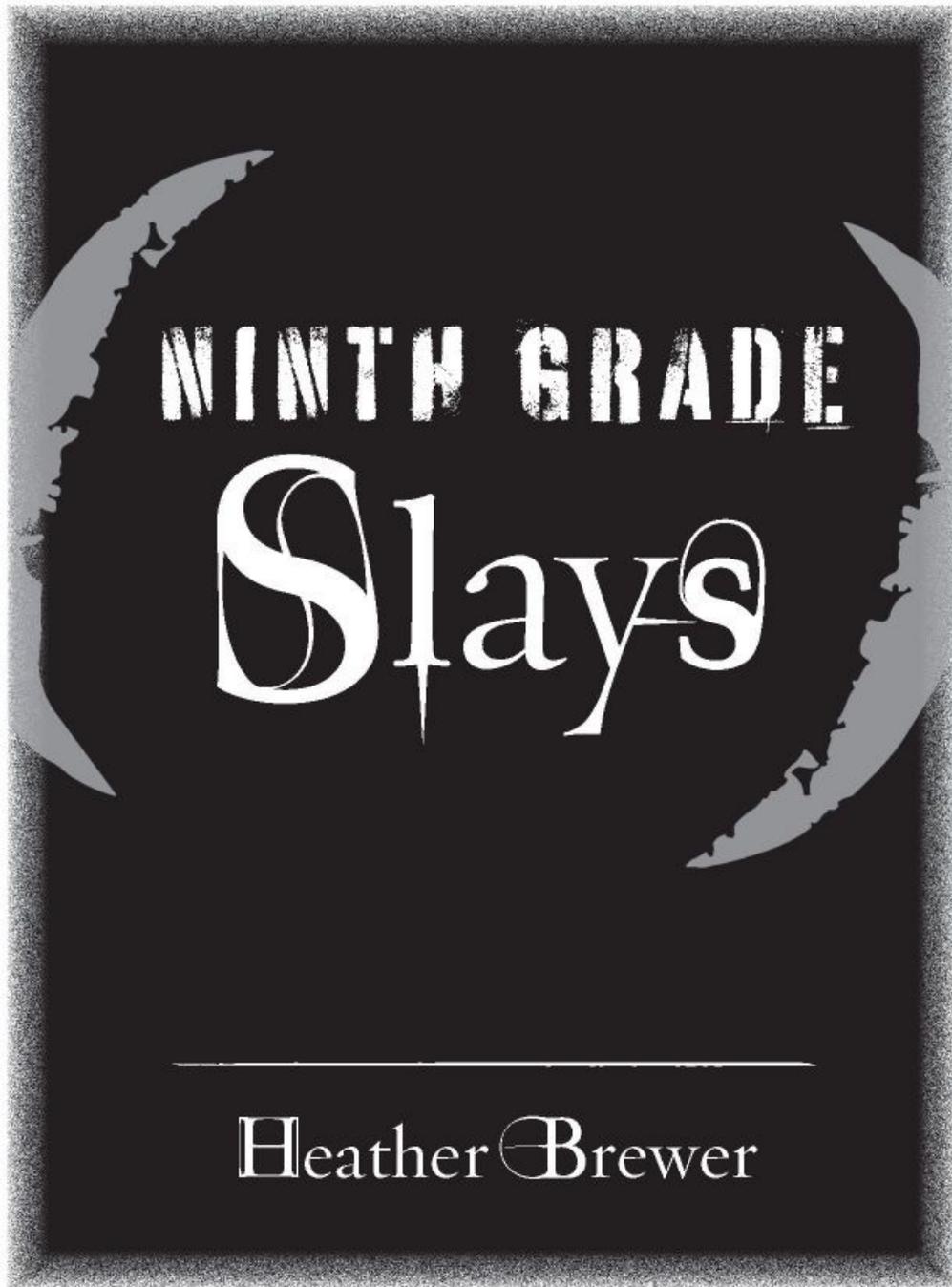
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*This one's for Jacob,  
because high school sucks*

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Vlad and I couldn't do it without you.

## HUNTER FOR HIRE

JASIK GRIPPED THE PHOTOGRAPH in his hand and scanned the face of the boy. Except for his pale complexion and clever eyes, no one would suspect the teen was anything other than human. But Jasik knew differently.

“This is him, then?” He looked up to the man behind the desk, who nodded once.

“Vladimir Tod.” The man’s voice was hoarse and raspy.

Jasik slipped the photo into his shirt pocket and cleared his throat against his fist. “I will need provisions, of course.”

“I will provide whatever you need.” The man wore a bitter, pinched expression on his face.

Jasik crossed the room and looked out the window to the city streets outside. It was dark, despite the many streetlights. People moved like ants on the pavement below, avoiding the small pools of light. There was almost no telling which were human and which vampires. Jasik wondered briefly if the sun suddenly rose and bathed them all in light, whether they would scurry away and seek their darkness elsewhere. “Might I ask how you came to know of my services?”

The man behind the desk coughed into a handkerchief before answering. When he removed the cloth from his lips, it was stained with glistening red. “Let’s not play games, Jasik. I’ve known for many years that your . . . talents . . . can be bought. Will you hunt this boy, or not?”

Jasik glanced back at the man and smirked. “My talents are expensive.”

“I assure you, there is no price that I am unwilling to pay.”

The man behind the desk leaned forward and flipped open his checkbook. After scribbling for a moment, he paused and nodded to Jasik. “All you need to do is provide me with the number of zeros.”

Jasik faced the desk and glimpsed the check. The ink had not yet dried before he said, “Three more and you’ve got a deal.”

## THE HUNGER

VLAD SQUEEZED HIS EYES shut tight. He was awake, but he wasn't incredibly happy about it. Weekends, even summer weekends, were meant for sleeping in ... especially when those weekends were spent hanging out super late under the full moon because your vampire genes won't let you go to bed before they've had their fill of nighttime. Even more so when you only had a matter of days before the joy of summer would be over and the dread of school would begin.

A low, buzzing sound drifted over his face, paused, then moved again toward his right ear. He popped open one eye and glared in disgust at the housefly that was hovering about the room. So that's what had woken him.

The fly fluttered over and landed on the tip of Vlad's nose. He swatted it away, and when it took refuge on his pillow, he smacked his hand down to squash it, but missed. Vlad grumbled obscenities under his breath. What did the fly have against sleep, anyway?

Flapping its tiny wings, it buzzed across the room and landed directly on the center of Henry's forehead.

After a moment of hesitation, Vlad crept over to Henry's sleeping bag. He raised his hand slowly, giving the fly one final chance to move. He whispered, "Don't think I won't do it."

The fly responded by washing its gross little fly face. If it could have spoken, Vlad was almost positive it would have laughed at him.

Vlad brought his hand down fast and hard. The slapping sound his palm made when it hit Henry's skin echoed throughout his bedroom but was shortly covered by a yelp from Henry, who sat up, clutching his forehead. "Dude!"

Vlad straightened his shoulders, triumphant in battle. "There was a fly."

Henry rubbed his forehead, snarling in disgust. "Well, did you at least kill it?"

"Yeah, I think so."

The fly buzzed past his ear and out the door.

Vlad swore again but was cut off by Henry. "I smell bacon."

But it wasn't the smell of bacon that called to Vlad. It was the promise of a steamy mug of O positive and a gooey cinnamon roll, Aunt Nelly's specialty. One big plus of living with Nelly—who was actually no relation to him at all, but his mother's best friend for years and years before his parents had passed on—was that she could bake cinnamon rolls so sweet and delicious that if she had the determination and funding, she could easily give Cinnabon a run for their money. Just stay away from her meat loaf.

They raced out the door and down the stairs. By the time they reached the kitchen,

they were panting and famished. Henry spotted the plate of crisp bacon on the table and grunted. “Food.”

Vlad opened the freezer and grabbed a bag of blood. He plucked a coffee mug from the cupboard and nudged Henry out of the way as he headed for the microwave. “Food.”

Aunt Nelly turned from her spot at the stove and chuckled. “I take it that means you boys are hungry?”

But neither Vlad nor Henry answered with any sound that could be classified as a yes or a no. Henry was too busy chewing on several slices of bacon at once, and Vlad had his head tilted back as he gulped down some warm O positive. It slid down his throat easily—it was always better warm—and when his thirst was quenched, he smacked his lips in satisfaction and reached for a cinnamon roll.

Blood and frosting: the vampire’s answer to coffee and donuts.

“Deb mentioned that an entire freezer of blood is about to expire at the hospital. With your appetite lately, Vladimir, I’d better sneak out as much of it as I can.” Nelly placed more bacon on the platter and sat a plate of eggs in front of Henry. She flashed Vlad a look of disapproval. “You’ve got blood all over your shirt.”

Vlad looked down at the two dime-size red circles on his shirt and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. I was really hungry.”

Nelly’s gaze softened. “Just be more careful next time. Contrary to popular belief, laundry doesn’t top my list of favorite things to do.”

Henry swallowed and reached for the pitcher of orange juice. “So did you get your schedule yet?”

Vlad nodded and sighed with an air of gloom and doom. “I got Mrs. Bell for English, first period.”

Henry offered Vlad a sympathetic glance. “Looks like you’re not alone. I’ve got her, too, and from what my mom said yesterday, so does Joss.”

“When’s your cousin supposed to get here anyway?” Vlad stuffed most of the gooey cinnamon roll into his mouth and chewed. The truth was he was kind of nervous about Henry’s cousin moving to town. There was always the slight chance that Joss would interfere with his and Henry’s time together, or worse, that he and Joss might not get along.

“Sunday. Oh, and just so you know, don’t count on seeing me much that day. My mom’s on some family togetherness kick.” Henry rolled his eyes.

Vlad followed suit. “How annoying.”

Nelly flashed him an incredulous glance. “Vladimir!”

Vlad took a sip of blood and raised an eyebrow at Henry. “I mean, how lovely of your parental figure to insist on enjoying quality time together. You should be grateful.”

Both boys broke into hysterical laughter. Nelly chuckled and shook her head. “All right, smart mouth. I’m getting the mail. Henry, watch Vlad while I’m gone. He’s a

trouble-maker.”

Vlad’s jaw dropped in mock exasperation. “Nelly!”

Nelly smiled sweetly. “I mean, he’s a wonderful boy who brightens my day and makes life worth living.”

After she slipped out the front door, Vlad eyed the wicked glimmer in Henry’s eye suspiciously. “What?”

Henry’s grin broadened. “Did you call Meredith yet?”

Vlad straightened his shoulders proudly. “Twice, actually.”

Henry watched him for a moment, the surprise in his eyes quickly giving way to suspicion. “You talked to her?”

Talk to her? Vlad hadn’t yet figured out a way to remove the lump that had taken up residence in his throat ever since she’d leaned in for a kiss after the Freedom Fest dance and he’d backed away, babbling like some kind of deranged lunatic. Talking to her was the least of his problems. First he needed to figure out how to breathe whenever she was near.

Vlad slowly stretched his hand out and picked up his mug, then took a long drink before returning it to the table. When he was finished, he met Henry’s eyes and sighed. “Nope. Hung up both times. I think she heard me breathing once though.”

“That’s progress.” Henry sighed. “You know she has caller ID, right?”

Vlad’s eyes grew wide. There it was again, that lump in his throat. “She does?”

Henry answered with a tone of indifference. “Yeah. But dude, check this out.” He grinned wickedly and lowered his voice to a tone of conspiracy. “Last night, Greg told me something interesting about the upperclassmen girls.”

Vlad leaned up against the counter and tried to act like he wasn’t completely curious. “Interesting? Like how?”

Henry leaned closer. “He says that if you can get invited to one of the senior parties, that some of those girls take pity on the lower classmen and they’ll—”

Aunt Nelly walked into the kitchen. In one hand was a stack of envelopes, in the other was a small brown box. She glanced at their frozen, startled expressions and raised an eyebrow. “What are you boys talking about?”

They answered in one wavering voice, “Nothing!”

Vlad eyed the envelopes hopefully. “Anything from Otis?”

Nelly sighed and shook her head as she flipped through the stack. “Honestly, Vladimir. Your uncle has written to you at least once a week since the day he left Bathory. Do you really think he’d forget about you now?” She pulled a thick parchment envelope from the pile and held it out to him with a smile.

Vlad sighed in relief. He’d only just met his uncle last year, after a horrible misunderstanding. Vlad had no idea Otis was his uncle at the time, instead believing him to be a maniacal substitute teacher, out to expose Vlad’s secret and quite possibly kill him. It was a simple mistake—anyone could have made it. Instead, Otis had been protecting him from D’Ablo, the president of an Elysian council, who was determined

to find Vlad and punish him for the crime of existing.

Apparently, vampires aren't really big on the idea of humans and vampires having kids together.

Ever since Otis had left town in order to flee from Elysia and away from vampirekind, Vlad and Otis had exchanged many letters. In them, Otis had taught him how to read the vampiric language, otherwise known as Elysian code, and had urged him to practice his telepathy daily. Vlad was grateful for all of these things.

Of course, Otis had also recently encouraged Vlad to work on controlling the minds of others. Vlad was intrigued—there was no doubt about that. But there was one aspect that Otis hadn't thought about. What if Vlad got caught? The ability to control the thoughts and actions of other people could hardly be blamed on your normal, everyday teenage hormones.

Still . . . it might make algebra easier to pass.

But rather than explain his fear of being discovered, Vlad had written his uncle several weeks ago and insisted that he was incapable of controlling the minds of others, hoping that Otis would accept it as a lost cause and move on to some of the stealthier abilities of the undead. Like animorphing . . . or maybe luring females with a glance.

He tore open the envelope and after squinting at Otis's crooked handwriting for a moment—it always took him some time to adjust his eyes—he read.

*Dearest Vladimir,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. To answer your most recent questions: (1) No, there has been no further word from Elysia concerning you or your father. However, you must remember that I am no longer privileged to information concerning the legal procedures of the Stokerton council. All of my information is hearsay and, therefore, not completely reliable. (2) Your aunt is right to be so "overprotective" and insist that you go nowhere alone. You may be a fearsome creature of the night, Vladimir, but you are also a teenager and, by definition, her ward. Besides, it is possible that Elysia may decide to exact vengeance for your murder of their president last year . . . despite the fact that it was self-defense. (3) I'm sorry, Vladimir, but the rumor that vampires are able to charm women with a leering gaze is utterly ridiculous and completely false. Have you tried simply asking Meredith if she likes you? In my experience, the direct approach works best. Calling a girl and breathing into the phone never got anyone a date. Whatever you decide, remember to be a gentleman.*

*As promised, I am enclosing further instructions on how to best develop your telepathic skills. It surprises me that you have had only minimal success with this trait, as you should be able to read the minds of anyone you wish, but we must both remember that you are the first of your kind, Vladimir, and things will likely be different for you. When vampires are made, there is a natural order to their skill development, but you . . . you were born, and as such, we cannot be certain which traits you will inherit from your father's vampire nature, and which you will not, due to your mother's human DNA. We must deal with each of these skills as it presents itself.*

*Follow the enclosed instructions and practice, practice, practice! However, as your*

*former teacher, I must insist that you refrain from using your telepathy as a means to better grades. And yes, I'll know. Trust me.*

*As for the issues you seem to be having with mind control, give me time to compose some helpful tips regarding this skill. Together, we'll find a way to make this possible. Your father was quite adept at doing this. I confess that it surprises me that you may not be. But please know that I am not disappointed in the least.*

*You are always in my thoughts, Vlad. Please take care of yourself. Be mindful of your surroundings, and please continue to study Elysian code. I know the vampire language is challenging to read, but it is important that you memorize the Compendium of Conscentia. According to the phrase coined by the notable human philosopher George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."*

*Next week I will be in London—the address where I can be reached is enclosed. I will write as often as I am able to. Please give my warm regards to Nelly.*

*Yours in Eternity,*

*Otis*

Vlad ran his fingers over Otis's closing. *Yours in Eternity*. It was the same closing his dad had used in every note, every book, every birthday card, he'd ever given to Vlad. Vlad felt the looming shadow of grief sweep over him again. The death of a loved one is funny like that. It doesn't matter how much you grieve or how much time has passed, the littlest reminder of the person who died—a scent, an object, a word—can send you back to the moment you lost them, and before you can blink, you're overcome by the aching sadness you worked so hard to leave behind.

It was pretty disheartening to learn that dueling to the death last year against D'Ablo might set vampire society on his heels, despite the fact that D'Ablo had started the whole mess in the first place and Vlad had only blown a hole through him with the Lucis to avoid having D'Ablo rip one through him with his bare hands. But Vlad could deal with that. After all, thanks to Otis, Elysia thought Vlad was human, not half-vampire. Of course, Otis had said that what with Vlad possessing the Lucis, the most dangerous weapon against vampirekind, Elysia was pretty anxious to agree that he was human, to deny the notion that he was even remotely capable of hurting them, giving them little reason to chase after Vlad.

It was frustrating to learn that his uncle had absolutely no sensible advice regarding Vlad's current situation with the girl he liked. He thought about asking Nelly for her input, but the last thing he needed was a two-hour conversation about when Nelly was a teenager.

Vlad sighed. It was hopeless. How was he ever going to explain to Meredith that he had no idea why he hadn't kissed her after Freedom Fest dance last year, and that the only reason he hadn't returned her calls over the summer was that she would ask him to explain his inaction . . . and he couldn't. How was he supposed to explain something to her that even he didn't understand?

"What did he say?" Henry peered over Vlad's shoulder at the parchment.

Vlad folded the letter and shoved it back in the envelope, then withdrew the

instructions. “He says to tell Nelly hi and that he’s enclosed some tips on telepathy.”

Nelly smiled warmly and blushed, then glanced at her watch and sighed. She shook her head and reached for her purse. On her way out the door, she called behind her, “I’m late. I was supposed to take Deb’s shift at the hospital this afternoon. Can you boys fend for dinner?”

The door closed before they could answer.

Henry nodded toward Otis’s instructions. “You wanna try something out? I’ve been dying to know if Melissa Hart likes me.”

Vlad folded the notes up and slipped them in his back jeans pocket. “I want to study the notes first for a few days. Maybe we’ll try something this weekend.”

Henry groaned. “Come on! I’m busy this weekend. Joss, remember?”

“I want to read them first.”

“So read them. Then we can head over to the mall in Stokerton. Melissa is doing that ‘end of summer/fall fashion’ show they do every year, and you—”

“Henry, I said no.” Vlad’s eyes were fixed on Henry. His tone was stern.

Henry nodded slowly and reached for his orange juice.

Drudge or not, Vlad hated giving Henry direct orders, and he only did it if Henry was being too pushy about something Vlad didn’t feel like doing or discussing . . . or if Vlad really wanted a Pepsi, but he really didn’t feel like going into the kitchen to get one. Other than that, their vampire/vampire’s-human-slave relationship was working out pretty well. It was astounding how well Henry had taken the news that with one bite, he’d become Vlad’s drudge.

But then, maybe Henry had only taken it so well because Vlad had told him to.

The thought made Vlad shiver. He didn’t like the idea of controlling Henry’s actions. Truthfully, it creeped him out a little. But sometimes Henry could be so pushy.

Vlad flipped over the box and, spying his name on the label, proceeded to pop the flaps open. His lips spread into a grin, and he looked at Henry. “You wanna play *Race to Armageddon 2*?”

Henry gasped at the game box in Vlad’s hands. “No way!”

Vlad flipped the game over and looked at the screen shots. “They say it’s twice the action, three times the gore.”

Exchanging maniacal grins, they bolted for the living room.

Two hours, a bag of Doritos, seven Pepsis, and four bags of blood later, Vlad and Henry sat their controllers down and stretched. Henry’s eyes were wide with awed disgust. “That’s so gross. I love it!”

“No doubt. It’s so cool that the androids can fly now.” Vlad drained his Pepsi and sat the empty can on the coffee table. His stomach rumbled.

Henry furrowed his brow. “What’s with the alien king having six heads? That’s new. He’s gonna be tough to beat this time.”

“They really added a lot of blood. Speaking of which . . .” Vlad retrieved another

bag of blood from the refrigerator. As he was walking back into the living room, he let his fangs elongate—his hunger was pulsing beneath them. He bit through the bag and drained it, then let out a burp and wiped the excess from the corners of his mouth.

Henry chuckled. “Pig.”

Vlad snickered. “ ’Scuse me.”

Henry bit his lip thoughtfully for a moment. His tone became careful and serious. “Do you think you’ll ever start feeding on people?”

Vlad shook his head. “No way. Not in a million years.” He eyed Henry for a moment with his peripheral vision before facing him. “You actually think I’d do that?”

“Well, you *did* bite me when we were eight.”

Vlad flashed Henry an incredulous look. “Dude, we were *eight*. Besides, you told me to.”

Henry pretended not to hear him. “And just now, before you bit into that bag, your eyes changed that weird iridescent purple the way they do when you touch a glyph.” Henry nodded to the strange symbol on the cover of the *Encyclopedia Vampyrice* and shrugged. “I’m just saying it’s possible. I mean, what if the bags and snack packs aren’t enough anymore?”

Vlad shook his head and pressed his lips tightly together, tracing the glyphlike tattoo on the inside of his left wrist lightly. There was a long moment of silence before he spoke. “If they were good enough for my dad to live on, they’re good enough for me. Besides, the day I start feeding on people is the day I start beating you at video games.”

Henry laughed and picked up his controller. “So you’re saying it’ll never happen.”

## BATHORY HIGH

VLAD SHOVED TWO PENS into the front pocket of his backpack and zipped it closed. Henry had tried convincing him over the summer to buy a new bag, specifically a cool coffin-shaped one they'd seen at the mall in Stokerton, but Vlad preferred his old one. He wasn't against the gag—in fact, he found it quite hilarious that he and Henry would make such obvious statements about his being a vampire and that everyone in the town of Bathory shrugged it off, presuming Vlad to be just another goth kid—but he and his backpack had been through two years together. It had been up the flagpole almost as many times as Vlad had been shoved against a locker. In a way, it was his friend. Like Henry.

If he could strap Henry to his back and force him to carry his books.

Vlad pinned a new button to his backpack and swung it over his shoulder. Seeing it in the store had sent him into a hysterical fit, so he knew Henry would love it. The pin read CAREFUL, I BITE.

Aunt Nelly's voice drifted up the stairs. "You'd better hurry or you'll be late for your first day!"

Vlad started to slip the small black cylinder into his back pocket and paused, then placed the Lucis on his dresser. He knew Otis and Nelly would freak out about him not carrying the vampire weapon for even a day, but he wasn't exactly sure what effect it might have on humans, and the idea of carrying it into class made him feel a little queasy. Weapons, even vampire weapons, had no place at school.

He took the stairs by two and flashed a smile at his aunt at the bottom.

Nelly smiled back and handed him a snack pack, which he slurped down with glee. The blood was warm and gooey and slid down his throat with ease. The breakfast of champions, indeed.

Vlad handed the plastic container back to Nelly and had just brushed the tips of his fingers against the doorknob when Nelly asked, "Did you remember to put your sunblock on?"

Vlad chuckled, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "Why do you ask? Am I getting too tan?"

Nelly shook her head, a bemused smile on her lips, and Vlad slipped out the door.

Henry was standing on the sidewalk across the street, waiting. A bronze-skinned, good-looking kid stood next to him, and Vlad could tell by the similar facial features that they were related. Vlad gave a nod to Henry. "Hey."

Henry beamed and nodded toward the newcomer. "Hey. This is my cousin Joss."

Joss smiled but didn't say anything. Oh good. The strong, silent type.

They trudged toward the school together, following beaten paths between houses

and worrying aloud about their impending first day as high schoolers. Vlad's heart was hammering its objections against his ribs. And just as he'd taken enough deep breaths to calm the beating in his chest, he rounded the corner to face the front steps of Bathory High.

Bathory High School was quite a source of gossip in the small town of Bathory, as it had once been a Catholic church. The church had been deserted sometime in the mid-1800s, due to some sort of horrific affair that no one in town—including the librarian, who knew everything about Bathory's history and seemed to take great joy in sharing it with everyone—would talk about. Nearly a hundred years later, a wealthy businessman had purchased the property and developed it into what had been known as Bathory Preparatory Academy. Twenty years after that, the school had been turned into a public institution and eventually became what Vlad was squinting up at as he approached with his backpack slung over his shoulder.

"Henry!" Carrie Anderson waved her hand enthusiastically through the air.

Henry smiled sheepishly. "Be right back, guys." In a moment, he was enveloped by a wave of the kind of popularity that Vlad had only managed to witness from the shore.

Vlad sighed and turned to Joss. "Henry says you moved in from Cali."

Joss nodded. "He tells me you suck at video games."

After a moment, they both burst into laughter. Vlad beamed. "He's a funny guy."

"Popular, too, it seems." The look on Joss's face was one of disdain.

Vlad raised a surprised eyebrow at him. "I assumed all McMillans were popular."

"Not me, man. Not my thing." Joss shook his head, casting an unsettled glance at the crowd. "I prefer a select group of friends—generally people who don't suck up to you because of who your family is or how much money they have."

Vlad smiled. He and Joss were going to get along just fine.

Henry waved, and before Joss was swallowed up by the throng, Joss adjusted the messenger bag on his shoulder and smiled at Vlad. "Well . . . see ya, I guess."

"See ya." Vlad watched Joss disappear into the crowd and turned to squint up at the school again.

But he didn't squint for long.

As hands gripped his shirt and yanked him to the side of the building, Vlad's eyes widened in fear.

Bill Jensen and Tom Gaiber. Just his luck.

They hated him and had ever since the first grade for no particular reason as far as Vlad could tell.

Together, Bill and Tom slammed Vlad against the school's stone wall, their mouths distorted into wicked grins. Tom snarled, "Welcome to your first day of high school, goth boy."

Vlad winced as his head bounced off the wall. He tried to keep his eyes glazed with indifference, but they betrayed him by flitting back to the sidewalk for any sign of

help. He was about to have his face pounded into hamburger. Where was Henry when he needed him?

Bill leaned close. His breath smelled like tuna fish and three-day-old mayonnaise. “What’s the matter, goth boy? Cat got your tongue?”

Several witty retorts flitted through Vlad’s mind, but he thought better of saying anything and kept his mouth shut.

Sometimes your best defense against bullies is silence. Of course, if you let a bully push you around, you’re nothing but a total wuss. Straightening his shoulders, Vlad shoved back against Bill, but Tom grabbed him by the collar. A pain shot through Vlad’s back as he returned forcefully to the wall.

“Let him go.”

Vlad turned his head toward the sidewalk. Joss had apparently ducked away from Henry’s entourage and was looking at Bill and Tom matter-of-factly. His head was tilted slightly and one of his eyebrows was raised, as if he wasn’t used to people not doing what he told them to.

Apparently, Henry’s cousin was funny, but not terribly bright. Vlad wanted to tell Joss to beat it, but just then Tom rolled his eyes and pushed Vlad harder against the wall. Vlad’s spine was lodged against a rather pointy stone. He winced and fought to get away, but Tom had him pinned. “You’re gonna get it this year, goth boy. We’ve got plans for you.”

“I said, let him go.” Joss had sat his bag on the sidewalk and was looking at Tom without so much as a glimmer of fear in his eyes.

Tom and Bill released Vlad and turned to the newcomer.

*Run, Vlad thought, run for your life, Joss. Trust me.*

Tom and Bill exchanged glances that said that they weren’t really sure whether Joss was easy prey or not. With a final, deciding shove from Tom, they slinked back toward the front of the school without another word.

Vlad wondered what it was about Joss that had made them back off so quickly. Whatever it was, Vlad certainly didn’t have it.

He picked up his backpack and rubbed the lump on the back of his head thoughtfully. He wasn’t exactly sure how he felt about being rescued, but it was better than getting pummeled, he supposed. “Thanks.”

Joss smiled. “No problem. Those guys were jerks. Brainless Neanderthal jerks.”

“You’ve met them already?”

“Didn’t need to. I could tell by their sloped foreheads and unibrows.” Joss smirked. “Want me to break their arms off for you?”

Vlad chuckled. “That might be nice. I’d like to see them try to bully me then. What could they do, bump into me until it got really annoying?”

Crossing behind Joss on the sidewalk was Meredith Brookstone, dressed in a pink dress that swished about her knees as she walked. Her cheeks blushed slightly as she smiled at Vlad. Joss followed Vlad’s eyes, and when he saw Meredith, he smiled, too.