

UNCORRECTED PROOF • NOT FOR SALE

THE SAGA OF PANDORA ZWIEBACK • BOOK 2

BLOOD REIGN

SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW



STEVEN A. ROMAN

BLOOD Reign

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StarWarp Concepts
P.O. Box 4667
Sunnyside, NY 11104

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HER CHEST ACHED.

Eyes closed, Pandora Zwieback grimaced and gently massaged the spot above her heart, but it did little to ease the throbbing pain. It felt as though the world's biggest gas bubble had settled dead center inside her rib cage, and it wasn't in any hurry to pop. Pan grunted. If the damn thing persisted, she'd never be able to get back to sleep.

She forced a tiny belch, but it did nothing to alleviate the pressure on her heart. Pan sighed. The last time she'd suffered indigestion this bad, she'd been gorging on the Hungarian dishes her paternal grandmother, Erzsébet, had made for her fifteenth birthday. Total P-I-G behavior, but the chicken schnitzel and stuffed cabbage rolls and spicy liptauer had been *so* good it was almost worth spending half the night trapped in Bloat City.

Almost worth it. When the gas bubble formed, waking her up at three A.M., the pain was so intense she'd thought she was having a heart attack. Her mother, Karen—somehow aware that her only child was suffering—stumbled out of bed to stay up with Pan, rubbing her back, calming her nerves, helping her get through the crisis. And in the morning, after the bubble had dissipated and she could breathe normally again, Pan purposefully strode into the kitchen and finished off the stuffed cabbage for breakfast.

"You never learn, do you?" Mom had asked playfully.

"Sure, I do," Pan said around a mouthful of rice and ground beef. *"But no stupid gassy vegetable's ruling my digestive tract."* She pointed her fork at Karen. *"You gotta show these things who's boss, Mom—y'know?"*

Then she'd belched, and grinned broadly.

Mom sighed, walked over, and kissed the top of her head. *"That'll do, pig,"* she said warmly. *"That'll do . . ."*

Pan chuckled at the pleasant memory. “Thanks, Mom . . .” She smiled and opened her eyes—to find herself gazing up at a bloodred sky.

“ . . . the hell . . . ?” she muttered.

Pan sat up and gasped. This wasn’t her bedroom, she realized—she was lying in the middle of a street.

Surrounded by bodies.

Most of them were adults: men and women of varying ages, half of them attired in expensive suits, the other half adorned in frills and lace, as though for a fancy costume party. A few were engulfed in flames, their burns so horrible it was impossible to distinguish gender. Clamping a hand over her nose and mouth, Pan turned away before the stench of roasting meat that filled her nostrils and singed the back of her throat caused her to throw up.

There were others, she now saw, who were not so nattily dressed. Adults and teens, senior citizens and children, police officers and paramedics—all just as dead as the partygoers, sprawled around the sidewalks and curbs with their features frozen in expressions of shock and outright terror.

“What is . . . what is going on?” she asked, all too aware of the way her voice nervously jumped a couple of octaves.

Pan scrambled to her feet and looked around. She recognized the area—Astoria, Queens, about a half block from Renfield’s House of Horrors and Mystical Antiquities, the museum owned by her father, David—but not like this: not as a warzone. Cars were on fire; windows in every building had shattered, littering the streets with glass shards; the air was thick with the tang of smoldering metal and burning flesh. And except for the bodies, she was completely alone.

Alone with the dead.

Her heart suddenly began racing; her head throbbed; it became difficult to breathe. She knew what that meant, what all the signs were pointing to.

A panic attack.

“No,” she said hoarsely—and then, more forcefully, “No.” She couldn’t lose control now. She needed to calm down, to make sense of this bizarre scene; maybe later she could waste time freaking out. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and slowly released it through her nostrils, willing her wildly beating heart to slow down, her pounding head to end its drumbeat. Then she

began whispering the coping statement that her psychiatrist, Dr. Farrar, had taught her to help get through a crisis: “It’s just a bump in the road, it’s not the end of the world. It’s just a bump in the—”

A sharp twinge in her heart doubled her over, and Pan clenched her teeth to keep from screaming. It didn’t stop a low groan from pushing past her lips, however, but she was able to fight the excruciating pain before it drove her to her knees.

She exhaled sharply and pressed the palms of both hands against her chest, moving them in slow, circular motions over her heart. Gradually, the ache eased a tiny bit and she was able to straighten up.

Pan took her hands away from her chest—and froze. Her palms were stained a bright red. Confused, she looked down at the black T-shirt she was wearing. Mom had presented her with the T a couple of days ago, and Pan had been proud to show it off. Printed on the front was a full-color, silk-screened image: a cartoon drawing of a devil girl’s face with a Band-Aid across her nose and a bruise on her cheek.

Its eyes were bleeding.

“You’re a reg’lar friggin’ mess, ain’t ya?” said a rough voice beside her. “But I guess I ain’t much to look at, neither.”

Pan looked up and yelped. One of the charbroiled corpses—a man not much taller than she and wearing the remains of a dark suit—was standing a few steps away. His features had been burned away, his throat had split open like the skin of a baked potato, but he was somehow still able to communicate. Pan found herself mesmerized by his exposed vocal cords, and how they vibrated when he spoke. The nasally pitch of his voice reminded her of the movie actor Joe Pesci.

“Had yerself a little run-in with the dark lady, did ya? Ha! I know what *that’s* like.” He flashed a shark-toothed smile and gazed around at the destruction. “Don’t know why that broad had to go stickin’ her nose in where it don’t belong, anyway. I mean”—he gestured at the bloody and smoldering corpses—“considerin’ how eager we all was to go rippin’ into each other for a chance at the Prize, who needs La Bella Tenebrosa around to do the killin’? Am I right?”

“I . . . I guess,” Pan muttered, not having a clue as to what he was yammering about.

He turned back and frowned at her; the skin around where his laugh lines should have been cracked, flaked off, and settled on his tie. “Thing is, little girl, you ain’t one’a my clan’s members—that friggin’ piece’a crap punk outfit you got on is a dead giveaway—”

“It’s not punk,” she said. “It’s Goth.”

“Whatever. Anyways, you ain’t part’a House Orlock, an’ you ain’t frilly enough to be one’a those House Otoyo mopes from Japan . . . so just what vampire clan *do* you belong to?”

Pan started. “*Vampire?* I’m not a vampire.” Besides, outside of movies and TV shows and books, there was no such thing as a real vampire—everybody knew that. Although now that she considered the matter, something told her that wasn’t exactly true . . .

My Undead Cousin Vinnie snorted derisively. “Oh, yeah? Well, if you ain’t a vampire, you mind tellin’ me what yer doin’ with that thing in ya?”

“W-what thing?” Pan stammered.

“The *stake*, sweetheart,” he replied, pointing at her. “If you ain’t a vampire, then whattaya doin’ with that hunk’a lumber rammed through ya?”

“S-stake . . . ?” she managed to croak. For a moment she fought the urge to glance at the focus of his attention, but slowly her eyes tilted downward.

There was a broken wooden handle poking out of her chest.

Pan bit down hard on her bottom lip to block the scream that tried to vault over her tongue. This, she realized, had been the source of her pain all along—but how could she have missed seeing it? And how could she still be alive with something like that piercing her heart?

The most important question, though—one she was hesitant to ask herself—was, *was* she alive?

Pan rolled her eyes. Of *course* she was alive! How stupid a question was that? This was probably some kind of weird dream she was having after watching another all-night horror movie marathon. *You keep watching all those vampire movies*, her maternal grandmother, Ellie, used to say, *and one day you’re gonna turn into one!* At the time, Pan thought that would be the coolest thing ever.

Now, though, with a wooden stake rammed deep into her chest? Not so much . . .

She gazed at the burned man standing before her, then at the other corpses, which were beginning to stagger to their feet. Most

of the . . . vampires—if that’s what they really were—appeared angry at finding themselves here, although a few seemed downright frightened by the situation. As for their human victims, even from a distance she could tell how scared and confused they were, especially the children.

Pan glanced down at the stake, and shuddered. *Not as much as I am . . .*

She took a deep breath to calm down, then exhaled shakily and raised a trembling, bloodstained hand to touch the splintered wood with her index finger. A tiny blue spark of electricity crackled at the contact point and she gasped as—

It all came back to her in a flood of memories: The Albany Megamall, where she’d punched that mean girl, Nikki Van Schrik, in the face for badmouthing Pan’s parents. Mom sending her downstate to stay with David until Nikki’s family stopped freaking out over their little darling getting—in Pan’s opinion—a long-deserved beat-down. Meeting the shape-shifting monster hunter Sebastienne “Annie” Mazarin—the “dark lady” the crisped vampire had alluded to—and her friend, a hot teenage boy named Javier Maldonado, in the train tunnels beneath Pennsylvania Station as they chased a trash-stealing monkey. How Annie had made her realize that the monsters Pan had been seeing for the past ten years really did exist; that Pan wasn’t the paranoid schizophrenic the psychiatric community had labeled her, but instead possessed a special talent for seeing past supernatural creatures’ human disguises. Then later that night, Dad had unveiled a weird skeleton—and the same wooden stake stuck in its chest that Pan now had ownership of—that he’d bought from some collector in England, which Annie explained the next day was not only the remains of an old boyfriend, a fallen angel named Zaqiel, but that the stake was actually the tip of the Spear of Longinus, the weapon used by a Roman soldier to stab Jesus Christ while he hung on the cross. Following that revelation was the gun battle between rival vampire clans that erupted right on this very street, and Zaqiel’s resurrection. Then Mom’s capture by the vampires. Pan grabbing the spear and rushing to her aid, only to arrive too late and finding her dead. The mocking tone of the fallen angel, her mother’s blood still moist on his lips, ringing in her ears as she wept over Karen’s body. Pan, consumed with hatred, charging forward, spear held

high. Zaqiel disarming her—before impaling her with the ancient weapon.

Before killing her.

Her legs suddenly weakened and Pan leaned against a car for support. “Oh . . . Oh, God . . .” she gasped. “I’m . . . really dead?”

“Hey, we’re *all* dead around here, sweetheart,” Count Pesci the Vampire said. “Some of us more’n once. I guess in your case, it’s like they say: there’s a first time for everything, right?” He chuckled at his little joke, then frowned when the girl didn’t join in.

“But . . . but what about Mom?” Pan asked herself, ignoring the cindery monster. She looked around in a slow circle, calling out, “Mom? *Mom!* It’s Pan! Where are you?” A twinge of panic plucked at her severed heart. Why wasn’t Karen answering?

She scrambled onto the car’s hood, then stepped onto the roof. From here she could see the entire area—and more. She hadn’t noticed it from ground level, but at a slightly higher elevation it was apparent that the war zone had a distinct border—a sort of shimmering heat haze at the end of each street, similar to what she’d observed the first time that Annie had encouraged her to open her eyes to the magic-laced realm that had always existed around her, side by side with the human world. This time, as she gazed at the wavering, transparent barrier at the end of the block, her special sight revealed glimpses of other people, in other places: a fog-blanketed road on which blazed a multicar pileup, the accident victims screaming as they burned; next to that, soldiers, riddled with bullets, sprawled across the dirt floor of a mountain stronghold; to the right of that, a woman lying on a moldy carpet in an abandoned building, a makeshift crack pipe beside her. And on and on and on, in all four directions—kaleidoscopic tableaux of death upon death upon death.

Pan closed her eyes and wept for them all—people she had never known and never would, yet lives ended all too soon. Like her own. Like her mother’s.

“*MOM!*” she wailed.

“Whattaya whinin’ about now?” the vampire asked. “Yer *mother?* Little late to be cryin’ fer Mommy, don’cha think?”

Pan angrily wiped away her tears and snarled at him. “I don’t see her. Why don’t I see her?”

“Hey, how should I know? I don’t even know who you’re talkin’ about.” He waved a dismissive hand at her. “Whiny little punk . . .”

“Sure you do. The one the angel . . .” She swallowed nervously, barely able to get the words out, then gestured toward a spot on the asphalt a couple of yards away. “He killed her, right there, in the middle of the street.”

The dead man appeared confused—a neat trick, considering he didn’t have much of a face left to pull off such an expression. Then his black eyes widened just a hair. “What—the broad in the Harley-Davidson T-shirt? That blonde the angel was nibblin’ on? That who you mean?”

“Yes!” She hurriedly climbed down from the roof of the car. “Did you see her?”

“What the hell’d *she* be doin’ here? She ain’t dead.” He paused. “Leastways she wasn’t last time I seen her—right before that friggin’ Knight, Alexander, put a couple’a incendiary rounds in me.” The vampire snarled. “Ruined a friggin’ five-hundred-dollar suit . . .”

Pan started. No, he couldn’t be right. She’d knelt beside her mother, stared in horror at the blood dripping from her punctured throat, felt Karen’s skin, icy to the touch . . . “You’re wrong. I—”

She suddenly halted and thought back to her final moments of life, after Zaqiel had impaled her with the spear. Knowing that death was only seconds away, she’d wondered if she’d be reunited with her mother in the afterlife, only to hear:

“Pan! Oh, God, no!”

Mom’s voice.

Clear as day. Unmistakable.

Karen Bonifant—very much alive, and screaming for her only child.

“*PAN!*” But then had come the sounds of her struggling with someone. “*Let me go! Let me—*” A loud thump, like a heavy punch, cut her off, followed by car doors slamming and tires squealing.

The vampires had taken her away.

Pan gasped. Mom *was* alive—still in terrible danger, but alive and in need of rescuing. Yet . . . who was going to *do* the rescuing?

The smile faded. *Not you, dead girl. You’re waaay past saving anybody.*

Her lips twisted into a snarl. “No,” she said aloud. “Mom *needs* me. I *promised* I’d come get her.”

How, though? Mom was back in the real world, and Pan was... wherever. She looked around. It didn’t appear to be heaven—although, really, how would she know for certain—but it didn’t appear to be hell, either. Pan ignored the growing curiosity of her inner horror fangirl—who, if given half a chance, would want to see just how accurate Dante Alighieri had been in describing the Devil’s furnace room when he wrote *The Inferno* back in the fourteenth century.

Okay, not heaven or hell, but maybe purgatory? That seemed more likely. The spiritual no-man’s-land where souls were supposed to hang out indefinitely until a decision was made as to who was getting invited into God’s penthouse suite and who was getting tossed into Satan’s overheated basement. For her and the victims and vampires here, the celestial hangout resembled the very street in Queens on which they had died, but the other locations she’d spotted through the barriers meant the landscape changed to reflect whatever settings those other people had died in.

All those men and women and kids, they died today—like me, she thought morosely, then quickly shook her head to dispel the wave of depression she felt lapping up against her mental shoreline. Yes, it was totally sad, what happened to all those people, but she needed to stay focused—for Mom’s sake, if not for her own. No matter what part of the afterlife she’d wound up in, the bottom line remained that she was here and Mom was on Earth, and Pan needed to get back and help her. If there *was* a way to get back.

I wonder if Annie knows any magical resurrection spells? Pan thought, then grunted softly. *Nah. With my luck, I’d come back as a zombie wanting to eat everybody’s brains, and then somebody’d have to shoot me in the head and I’d wind up right back here. That would totally suck.*

She climbed onto the hood of another car and sat down to consider the situation. In the short time she’d known Annie, the huntress had opened Pan’s eyes to a world of supernatural wonders and living, breathing monsters: a world the teen Goth had spent the better part of the last decade believing was a figment of her self-described “monstervision.” On top of that, when Javier had been injured during his pursuit of the trash monkey in the subway tunnels, she’d been able to treat a bump on his head—with *just the touch of a finger*. Annie had said that meant Pan had healing powers,

on top of possessing monstervision. Then, the next morning, Dad had jokingly threatened to kill her for staining one of his bath towels with the black cream she used to color her natural-blond hair, and Pan had said:

"Then I'll use my new magical superpowers to come back from the dead..."

Her eyebrows shot up. Could she really do something like that? Before yesterday she would have thought the notion absurd—but after everything she'd experienced in the past twenty-four hours? It didn't seem quite so crazy.

...

Well, no crazier than sitting in an afterlife waiting room with a makeshift stake poking through her heart.

"Only one way to find out . . ." She closed her eyes, crossed her legs Indian-style, and placed her hands palms-up on her thighs. It was one of those yoga positions Pan had seen her mother perform countless times when she wanted to relax. She used to think it look ridiculous, like when Doctor Strange did the same thing in his Marvel comics so he could project his astral form out of his body, but right now maybe Mom and the Master of the Mystic Arts were on to something. Problem was, it was really hard to concentrate with the Spear of Longinus wiggling in her chest every time she drew a breath. Pan grunted, opened her eyes, and glared at the ancient wooden handle. "Stupid spear."

She grabbed the broken wood with both hands. Blue-white lightning flared around her hands.

"Now what the hell're you doin'?" the vampire asked.

Pan gritted her teeth and began pulling. "What's it *look* like I'm doing? I'm getting this thing outta me." Trying to, at least. It was really stuck all the way through her—she could hear the rasp of the iron tip as it scraped against the lining of her leather jacket.

She pulled harder, and was rewarded by the spear moving a couple of inches—followed by the most intense pain she'd ever felt in her life . . . next to the pain she'd experienced from the spear going in, of course. Pan bit down on her bottom lip to keep from screaming.

"Stop being such a baby," she growled at herself. "Just yank the damn thing out."

Eyes tightly shut, screeching through clenched teeth, she doubled her efforts, dragging the weapon back through her body. Tears flowed down her cheeks; her mouth filled with blood; her

skin and muscles crackled as the mystical energies generated by the spear fought her every inch of the way. The pain threatened to overwhelm her, yet she refused to give in. She was already dead—anything else, she figured, including the unbearable agony, was just an inconvenience; an obstacle blocking her path back to Mom. The spear shifted a little more and Pan opened her eyes to watch her progress—

—and saw her father right in front of her.

David Zwieback's face was inches away from hers, eyes wide in surprise. She couldn't see the rest of him—it was like he was peering at her through a small window. His face was smudged with dirt and the tracks of dried tears; fresh ones glittered along the edges of his bloodshot eyes.

"Dad!" Pan cried, and reached out to him.

He yelped and jumped back in fright. Now she had a better view of him: he was sitting on the real-world version of this same Queens street—next to her corpse, she assumed, which would explain why her viewpoint was tilted on one side: her body was still lying where it had fallen.

My body . . . Pan thought sadly, then gasped. *Oh, my God! I'm back in my body!*

Behind Dad crouched her best friend, purple-haired Sheena McCarthy, and Annie's young Puerto Rican friend, Javier. From the horrified expressions Pan saw on their faces, she had no doubt they'd heard her, too—and it was seriously freaking them out.

You and me both, guys, Pan thought. She turned her attention back to her father, who was inching away from her. "Dad, please! It's me!"

Dave paused, tilted his head to one side in confusion, and then slowly leaned forward. "Pan . . . ?" he whispered.

Sheen gently placed a hand on his shoulder. "I . . . I wouldn't go doin' that, Mr. Z."

Despite her situation, Pan had to smile. Leave it to a fellow horror fan like Sheen to realize how stupid it was for *anybody* to lean in close to a suddenly vocal corpse. Dad should have known that as well, considering he ran a horror-themed museum, but given it was his *daughter's* corpse that was doing the talking, Pan was willing to overlook his mistake.

Dave ignored Sheen's mild attempt at restraining him and moved closer. "Pan, is it—"

Anything else he was about to say was drowned out by a blast of sound—a single musical note that seemed to explode all around her. Pan released the spear to clasp her hands over her ears, and in doing so lost the connection to the other side.

Then the bloodred sky ripped open, and through the rift swept a phalanx of winged men and women in what appeared to be riot gear. Her first impression was that they looked like a bunch of comic book fans cosplaying in Hawkman and Hawkgirl costumes; then she realized they could only be—

“Angels,” Pan whispered in astonishment. “Those are angels.”

One of them was carrying what she thought was an oversized trumpet, but then she remembered seeing a similar instrument in her friend Tommy Guerrero’s apartment; his dad played one in a weekend jazz band. A flugelhorn, it was called. The angel raised it to his lips and blew another eardrum-rattling note, probably to get everyone’s attention. Or to sound the charge. Or to scare the crap out of the humans and vampires. That last choice was definitely what *she* was feeling.

“Great. Like my friggin’ day wasn’t bad enough . . .” Crusty the Vampire shook his head in a forlorn gesture, wisps of charred scalp spiraling away like black snowflakes. “Gonna start cryin’ fer yer mommy again, little girl? ’Cause if ya thought yer day sucked up to *this* point . . .” He threw up his hands in exasperation. “*Pfffb.*”

“Why? What’s going on?”

He jerked a thumb toward the sky. “Looks like His Majesty up there wants t’clear the field,” he replied with a sneer. “Prob’ly expectin’ more souls to come poppin’ up, if the fightin’s still goin’ on, so he sent the goon squad in to do the groundskeepin’. Now they’re gonna start dishin’ out the pain—and believe you me, little sis, ain’t nothin’ these holy mothers like better’n kickin’ a little vampire ass.”

“So? Like I already told you, I’m *not* a vampire.”

“Yeah, like that’s gonna make a difference to *them*.” He pointed to the Spear of Longinus—which, to the casual observer, would no doubt appear to be exactly the sort of wooden stake one would expect to see jutting out of a vampire’s chest.

“Oh,” Pan said in a small voice, and glanced at the broken handle. If what the thug said was true, then this thing *really* needed to come out . . .

A scream from someone across the street brought her attention back to the celestial security force, and she watched as the angels' methods for "clearing the field" quickly became evident. They hovered above the warzone, studying the souls that cried out to them for salvation, and those—both human and vampire—that shrank back in fear. Then they swooped down to pass judgment. Humans who had obviously passed the "good" test during their lives were taken by the hand and carried into the sky, through the rift toward what Grandma Ellie would probably call their "just reward." The ones who'd probably spent every waking moment acting like total d-bags were herded toward a sinkhole that had suddenly formed in the middle of the intersection. From her perch on the car hood Pan could see down into the pit—it seemed bottomless, but the shrieks and wails that drifted up from the shadows, and the stench of sulfur that wafted up to irritate her sinuses, made it quite clear that a bottom did exist. She had a pretty good idea what was down there. Her inner horror fangirl demanded a closer look, just to be certain, but Pan thought they were both fine right where they were—for the moment.

As for the vampires . . .

Whether they stood their ground or ran away, the undead clan members were struck down by fiery swords that the angels pulled from golden scabbards attached to their weapons belts. One slice and the vampires were instantly reduced to ashes, which swirled in the air before being sucked down into the hellmouth.

That was the point at which Pan decided it was time to move a safe distance away from the sinkhole. Her inner fangirl didn't argue.

Not that Pan was out of danger. As she slid off the car hood, a male angel swooped down and landed close to the vampiric goodfella. Based on the manner in which he stared daggers at the shark-toothed gangster, God's bouncer appeared to be in a particularly foul mood. Maybe he hated working the cleanup shift.

The angel slowly drew his sword. Bright red-and-gold flames ignited along the blade as soon as it cleared its sheath.

The vampire snorted disdainfully. "Think yer pretty tough with that sword an' everything, don't ya? Well, you can take that pig-sticker and shove it up—"

The sword strike came at warp speed, the blade cleanly separating the vampire's head from his neck; a moment later, both

head and body erupted into flame before disintegrating into ash. Pan watched, openmouthed, as the goon's remains swept past her on a sudden breeze and made their journey down to hell.

Then the angel turned and snarled at her—the girl with the wooden stake stuck in her chest.

Pan swallowed nervously. “Hey, now, look, before you get all, uh, judgmental and stuff—”

“*Demon*,” he growled, and strode forward.

“No, wait!” Pan cried. “I’m not a vampire! I’m just a Goth chick!” She backed away, tugging with all her might on the damn spear that would just. not. come. *out!* Bluish electricity flared around her hands, then surged up her arms. She tried to ignore the pain, but when her eyeballs started tingling it took a supreme effort to avoid freaking out and maintain her grip on the wooden handle.

Then, miraculously, she felt it shift forward; not a great distance, maybe six inches, but at least she’d gotten it moving. Now if she just had another minute or so to completely work it loose . . .

The angel wasn’t about to give her that time, though. He followed her retreat, stalking her step for step. “Undead parasite or painted harlot, it matters not. You are a sinner—of that I am certain. And there is always room in hell for one of your kind.”

“Aren’t you listening?” Pan asked. “I said— Wait.” She snarled. “Did you just call me a *harlot*?”

The celestial warrior raised his sword as he closed in for the kill.

“Oh, crap!” Pan yelped, and jumped away as the fiery blade swung toward her head—only to lose her balance by tripping over a piece of rubble. Arms pinwheeling, she stumbled wildly for a few steps, until finally slamming backward against the side of another vehicle—

—at which point, amid a flash of blue lightning and a loud crack of thunder, the spear finally popped out.

The ancient weapon clattered on the ground as Pan bounced off the car and fell to her hands and knees. She rubbed her sore chest and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. “Oh, God, that is *so* much better,” she said, and looked up—

—into the disbelieving eyes of her dad, Sheena, Javi, and a female paramedic. They were sitting on the ground about five feet away, mouths hanging open, their expressions a mixture of confusion and fright.

Startled, Pan looked around. The street was still a warzone, still littered with corpses and stinking of burnt metal and flesh, but here there were no angels trying to cut off her head, no sinkhole leading to hell. Instead, an army of very human-looking police officers, firemen, and emergency medical technicians had descended on the area; crowds of bystanders and reporters pressed against NYPD wooden barricades, attempting to get a closer look at the chaotic scene; the air was filled with wailing sirens and grating car alarms and the angry buzz of swarming police and news media helicopters.

She was back among the living.

A shrill giggle eased its way past her lips, one eerie enough to make all four onlookers gasp and draw back a little farther. The sound scared Pan, too, when she realized it was coming from her. She clamped both hands over her mouth before the giggle grew into a hysterical laugh, and forced herself to calm down. It took some effort, but when she at last felt a bit more in control she lowered her hands.

“W—” she began to say, then had to turn her head and spit. A wad of blood-thickened phlegm smacked onto the asphalt, and she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Wh . . . where’s Mom?” she croaked.

No reply. They were obviously too weirded out to answer, but Pan wasn’t in the mood to wait until they got tired of making googly eyes at her.

“*Where’s. Mom?*” she asked loudly, then grimaced and clutched her chest. Raising her voice like that had sent a wave of pain through her heart; it felt as though the spear was still lodged in it. She drew a sharp breath through clenched teeth. “It’s just . . .” she gasped, “just a bump in the . . . in the road . . . not the end . . . end of the world . . .”

“Zee . . . ?” Sheen croaked.

Pan waved her off; slowly, the pain subsided. Damn, she thought, this coming-back-from-the-dead stuff hurt—a *lot*. “Just... just tell me.”

“She . . . That angel, Zaqiel, and the vampires took her,” Sheen slowly replied.

“Yeah,” Javi said. “But . . .” He nervously cleared his throat. “But Annie went after them.”

Pan nodded weakly. “Okay. Good . . . that’s good . . .”

Dave Zwieback scrambled forward and kneeled beside her. Gently, he brushed aside the tangled, blood-matted hair that had fallen over her face so he could look into her eyes. “Pan? Is it . . . is it really you?”

She wasn’t surprised by the question. A major horror fan had just witnessed his daughter rise from the dead—of *course* he was going to wonder if her body had become the home for something far more diabolical than his monster-seeing child.

“Y-yeah. It’s me, Dad.” A sickly smile quirked the corners of Pan’s mouth as the ache in her chest flared up again. “P-pretty wild, right? I guess I—” Another twinge, even more painful than the last, made her gasp. “I guess I really *do* have magical superpowers, huh?” she whispered hoarsely.

Then her eyes rolled up in her head and the world spun away into darkness.

TO BE CONTINUED IN

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEVEN A. ROMAN is the bestselling author of the novels *Blood Feud: The Saga of Pandora Zwieback, Book 1*, *X-Men: The Chaos Engine Trilogy*, and *Final Destination: Dead Man's Hand*.

His short fiction has appeared in the anthologies *Best New Zombie Tales 2*, *The Dead Walk Again!*, *Doctor Who: Short Trips: Farewells*, *Untold Tales of Spider-Man*, *The Ultimate Hulk*, *If I Were an Evil Overlord*, and *Tales of the Shadowmen 4: Lords of Terror*. He also wrote the graphic novels *Lorelei: Sects and the City* and *Sunn*.

Steve's upcoming writing projects include the novels *Stalkers: The Saga of Pandora Zwieback, Book 3* and *Doctor Omega and the Megiddo Factor*, and the comic book *The Saga of Pandora Zwieback Annual #1*.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

ELISEU "ZEU" GOUVEIA is the critically acclaimed writer/artist of the graphic novel *Lorelei: Sects and the City*, the creator of the superhero comic book *Infiniteens*, and a two-time winner of the National Comics Award (Best Short Story) at the Amadora (Portugal) International Comics Festival. He has also provided artwork for such titles as Moonstone Books' *The Phantom* and *Vengeance of the Mummy*, Image Comics' *Cloudburst*, and StarWarp Concepts' *Carmilla* and *A Princess of Mars*.

Zeu's current projects include the dark-urban-fantasy comic book *The Saga of Pandora Zwieback Annual #1*. He lives in Portugal.

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Eliseu Gouveia

Cover design by
K. C. Winters