

BLOOD FEUD

THE SAGA OF
PANDORA ZWIEBACK
Sample Chapter



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Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process *he* does not become a monster.

—Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche
Beyond Good and Evil

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The Albany Megamall was the ultimate tribute to consumer excess, wrapped in a three-story façade of polished glass and steam-scrubbed sandstone. Not even the cloudy sky looming above it could dim the pinkish glow the gigantic building seemed to give off. In the five years since its doors had opened, it continually provided the shops at Colonie Center and the Crossgates Mall, not to mention Woodbury Common in Central Valley, with some pretty stiff competition, and showed no signs of letting up. For one thing, you could find most of the items offered by the other places right here, without having to drive all over upstate New York. So the convenience of “one-stop shopping” had a lot to do with the mall’s success, as did its large number of parking spaces: acre upon acre of available spots in which to leave your vehicle, with little frustration of getting closed out. Except, as Pan had experienced firsthand, during the weeks leading up to Christmas—then the lots were freakin’ madhouses, with the shoppers’ bubbly holiday spirit replaced by a frightening mix of total panic and murderous road rage.

But, Pan reminded herself, next Christmas was still months away, so it was a safe bet no one was going to try and stab her with a curling iron over a limited edition gift-pack of scented candles she wanted to give her mom. Not again.

She let the flow of humanity streaming through the wide revolving doors carry her inside. Then, like every other time she’d been here, she paused in the enormous lobby to gaze at the sheer spectacle of the place. From the amusement park in the south wing to the movie multiplexes in the north and east, it was the closest thing to being in New York City’s five boroughs—just lumped into one location. Lots to do, lots to see, lots to explore, but right now there were only two stores in particular on which she was focused: the Spencer Gifts shop on the third level for more of

that black “shoe polish” Mom so detested (actually Manic Panic’s “Raven” brand of color cream); and the art supply depot in the west wing to replace some dried-up oil paints.

After a stopover at the first-floor ladies’ room to fix her face, she walked over to the closest escalator that would take her to the second level and stepped on board behind a trio of jogging-suited grannies: mall-walkers out for their daily stroll, no doubt.

That’s when her hip pocket suddenly roared with the guttural vocals of the death-metal tune “Incubus Summer.” The high-decibel ringtone was guaranteed to cause people to look back over their shoulders to find out what was drowning out The Captain and Tenille’s “Do That to Me One More Time” currently blaring from the mall’s speaker system.

As if on cue, the grannies turned around and glared at her. Pan sweetly grinned at them as she fished the cell phone from her pocket. She didn’t need to check the caller ID, she already knew who it was by the ringtone: her best friend, Sheena McCarthy.

“Hey, jungle queen! What’s going on?” Pan said. The nickname was a private joke they shared because Mrs. McCarthy had named her daughter after an old comic book character, “Sheena, Queen of the Jungle.”

“Not a lot. Just thought I’d give you a call, see how things are in Craptown.”

“Still crappy,” Pan admitted, and winked at the old ladies who were giving her the stink-eye. “I’m on my way to check out stuff at Spencer’s.” There was an odd sound in the background from Sheena’s end, like a bunch of people all yammering at once, but Pan couldn’t make out what they were saying. “Hey, where are you?”

“I’m in the City.” That was New York slang for *Manhattan*. It was a term generally used by people coming from the other four boroughs and not residents of the island, but common enough that everyone knew what it meant. “Standing in front of Burning Souls.” That was a former funeral parlor turned performance theater in the Bowery, a popular gathering place for Goths.

Pan glanced over at the face of the humongous clock tower that rose two levels above the mall’s main floor. “At ten in the morning, when you’re outta school? That’s kinda early for you, isn’t it?”

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“Tell me about it!” Sheena said, laughing. “But Sarkophagia tickets are goin’ on sale today and I didn’t wanna miss out, so I got on line at seven. There’s like a hundred people ahead of me—they camped out on the sidewalk last night!”

“Aw, damn it! I forgot all about that!” Pan moaned. Sarkophagia was one of their new favorite groups—a Norwegian death-metal band praised for their grisly concept albums and grand guignol-style stage shows, the latter complete with simulated human sacrifices and copious fountains of blood. And the dark-haired, muscular lead singer, Leander Faust, was such a complete stud that Pan would have paid to watch him read selections from Dr. Seuss . . . as long as he did it with his shirt off. Pan had played their debut CD, *Incubus Summer*, until it wore out Mom’s old Discman, and then replaced it with a bootlegged download—along with a copy of their recent follow-up, *At Midnight I’ll Take Your Soul*—for her iPod. Mom never would have paid for a legal iTunes download, not when every song on *Midnight* was flagged with an “Explicit” warning—and with good reason. It covered some real hard-core topics: trepanation—drilling holes in skulls—as an exorcism technique; torture and mutilation; even an ode to cannibalism. It was the kind of music Mom would freak out over if she ever heard it—which, of course, made it even more enjoyable.

A weary sigh pushed past her lips. “This sucks total ass, Sheen.”

“Yeah, it’s a regular tragedy,” Sheen replied sarcastically. “Sides, you really think your mom woulda let you come back here for a death-metal concert?”

“Well . . . no,” Pan admitted. “But maybe Dad could’ve . . .” She paused, and thought about that for a second. “No, he wouldn’t have gone for it, either.” Reaching Level Two, she stepped off the escalator and began threading her way through the crowds. The route to the third-floor escalator led through one of the megasized food courts, no doubt purposely designed that way by the mall’s owners to entice shoppers to stop and eat. The greasy odor of fish ‘n’ chips fought with the smells of fried chicken fat, Szechuan stir-fried vegetables, fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies, and Indian spices for possession of the air above the dining area. It made her stomach rumble hungrily.

“So there you go,” Sheena concluded. “Besides, what kinda friend would I be if all I did was to call and torture you with the knowledge that, while you’re trapped there

in Nature's culture vacuum, I'll be feastin' my eyes all night long on Leeannnnder?" She giggled.

"Bite me."

"Awww, don't feel so bad, Zee. According to Leander's latest Tweet, they're gonna be playin' Craptown in October."

Pan grimaced. "They're coming to Schriksdorp? Why the hell would they wanna do *that*?"

"I don't know. Maybe they like playing county fairs between major gigs. Or maybe nobody told them what that hole is really like. What, didn't you explain that to Leander in all your e-mails, where you begged him to take you away from that hellish place so you can be his undyin' sex slave?"

"Funny," Pan said dryly, while thinking, *Note to self: Stop copying Sheen on your messages . . .*

"Think Mom'll take your leash off for that one?"

Doubt it . . . Pan grunted. "Maybe. We'll see. So, who's going with you?"

"The usual crowd: Dylan and Lisa, Reyna and Tommy, Tory and Mora—not that any of them was willin' to get up this early to hang out on the line with me. Umm . . . Oh! Uwe's here with me—" Her voice faded for a moment as she apparently turned her head away from the phone to add, "Sorry, babe. Didn't mean to leave you out."

"Ooo-vay Kerr?" Pan replied, intentionally overstressing the first syllable of the Germanic name. "The one who called me a 'lummoX' when I kept pronouncing it 'Huey'?"

"Uh-huh."

Pan snorted derisively. "You're *still* going out with that jerk?"

Silence. Then: "I'm gonna ignore that, but only 'cause you're not standin' right in front of me so I could smack the crap outta you."

"Ooh, you're so tough when there's, like, a thousand miles between us."

That got a chuckle from Sheen. "Uh-huh . . . Oh, and my sister Rachel and her boyfriend, Joey, are comin', too. And before you comment on that, no, I'm not happy about it, but Mom and Dad weren't gonna let me go without—quote, unquote—adult supervision. I'm just gonna pretend they're not even there." She

paused, then added in a conspiratorial whisper, “I think they’re all afraid I might get pulled up onstage and used as a virgin sacrifice.”

“Little too late for *that*, don’t you think?”

“Oh, nice. *You’re* one to talk.”

“Hey, at least I don’t go bragging about it on my Facebook page.”

Sheena sighed melodramatically. “Jealousy, thy name is Pandora.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Pan replied dismissively. “So, is . . .” She stopped, then unconsciously raised her other hand to nervously chew on the thumbnail. “So, is Ammi goin’ with you?” she asked hesitantly.

A *very* long pause; then: “Why would I invite *him*?” There was an unmistakably icy tone in Sheen’s voice.

“Well, I . . . I thought maybe you guys had made up by now,” Pan said. “I know you and him had stopped talking after he and I . . . you know. But now that I’ve been exiled to Siberia, I figured maybe . . .” A tiny, forced laugh bubbled from her lips. “I mean, you guys used to be so tight and everything before. I never wanted you to become, like, enemies.” She took another nibble along the cuticle, scraping off some of the black polish. “You know?”

“*I don’t believe this!*” Sheena snapped, her voice erupting from the receiver with enough force to make Pan flinch. “After all the garbage he put you through, after what he did, you’re still pining over that . . . that *asshat*?”

“No,” Pan replied. “I’m simply asking a question.”

“Yeah, well, don’t,” Sheena warned. “Ammi’s dead to me—and he should be to you, too. *God*, Pan . . .” Her exasperated tone of voice trailed off for a second, then immediately hardened: “You haven’t been talkin’ to him, have you? Or textin’ him or anything? ‘Cause I swear to God, girl, if you start that self-abuse crap up again—”

“I haven’t done any of that,” Pan said earnestly. “I swear. Wiped his numbers from my cell, unfriended him on Facebook, listed his e-mail addresses with the spam blockers—the whole cyber-protection thing. But it’s like he dropped off the face of the earth since . . . you know.”

“The restraining order your folks took out?”

“Well, before that. Look, I’m not trying to hook up with him again—really. I was just . . . curious.”

Sheena *hmmf*ed. “You know what your problem is, Zee? You’ve been stuck in the boonies too long and the isolation’s gettin’ to you. You need a new boyfriend to take your mind off your old boyfriend. Seriously—you tellin’ me there isn’t one fine-looking slab of meat in all of Backwoodsia that isn’t even a tiny bit curious about”—her voice dropped to a deep, seductive, Barry White-like growl—“gettin’ a little dark-side lovin’ from the queen of the damned? Ohhhh, baay-by.”

Pan laughed softly. “Hey, believe me, I looked—you know I did.”

“Uh-huh—for, like, the first couple months you were up there. Then you turned into a nun or something.”

“Yeah, well, that wasn’t entirely *my* fault . . .”

“Hey, Zwieback!” a girl suddenly yelled from behind her. “I thought vampires only came out at night. What are you doing out of your coffin?”

Pan closed her eyes and sighed. She recognized that voice, and Nikki Van Schrik was absolutely the last person she’d wanted to run into. Then again, if she’d really made plans to avoid Nikki, she wouldn’t have come to the enormous shopping center in the first place; the Dolce & Gabbana shop in the east wing was like the girl’s second home. But in a consumer wonderland containing two hundred stores, a half dozen restaurants, and eight-screen movie multiplexes, scattered across three levels that seemed to stretch toward infinity, Pan had figured the odds were more than in her favor that she wouldn’t run into Nikki and her gang of suck-ups.

‘Course, she always *had* been bad with math . . .

“What’s goin’ on?” Sheena asked.

“Nothing,” Pan replied, a little too quickly. She winced; she never liked lying to her, especially when Sheen could tell when she was being conned. “Listen, I’ll give you a call later, okay?”

“Yeah,” Sheena said brusquely. She knew Pan was jerking her around, but knowing Sheen, she wasn’t going to press. Not right now, anyway. “Talk to you then.”

Pan, however, knew she couldn’t leave things the way they were—not with her best friend mad at her; she had to put them right. *Besides*, she thought glumly, *what’d you expect for bringing up your ex to the girl who kicked his ass—on your behalf?* “Hey, Sheen?” she said quickly.

Sheen sighed. “Yeah?”

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Pan gnawed at her cuticle a bit more. “Look, I . . . I’m sorry if I pissed you off before. I know you’re only looking out for me, and I do—I really do—appreciate what you did when all that stuff was going on between me and Ammi. I don’t *ever* want you thinking I don’t. ‘Cause I do. Really.” She paused, waiting for a reply, but none came. “So . . . are we good? You and me?” *God*, she thought, *that sounded so needy . . .*

“Sure, Vampira, we’re good,” Sheen replied in a playful tone. “BFF and all that—right?”

Pan grinned. “Yeah.”

A flood of voices suddenly poured through the receiver. “Look, I gotta run, too,” Sheen said, loud enough to still be heard. “The line’s startin’ to move.”

“Okay. Get some good seats for the show, or Tory’s gonna bitch about it for days.”

Sheen grunted. “I’m doin’ my best. I’ll tell you all about it tonight. Love ya, Zee!” There was a tiny beep as she hung up.

“You, too, jungle queen,” Pan murmured happily. She closed the phone and pocketed it, then turned around.

One crisis down . . .