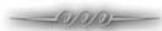


VAMPIRE EMPIRE



BOOK TWO: THE RIFT WALKER

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VAMPIRE EMPIRE



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an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2011 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover design by Grace M. Conti-Zilsberger

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15 14 13 12 11 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Griffith, Clay.

The rift walker / by Clay Griffith and Susan Griffith.

p. cm. — (Vampire Empire ; bk. 2)

ISBN 978-1-61614-523-1 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-1-61614-524-8 (ebook)

1. Vampires—Fiction. I. Griffith, Susan, 1963– II. Title.

PS3607.R5486R54 2011

813'.6—dc22

2011019050

Printed in the United States of America

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK IS dedicated with love to our mother, Melida, who is a constant example of determination, toughness, and grace. There are heroes in the real world too.

We also thank our wonderful readers and critics—Vivian, Lillian, June, Sean, and Ann.

And we laud the tireless crew at Pyr, including Lou Anders and Jill Maxick.

CHAPTER



THE VINEYARDS WERE dying. Overripe grapes lay rotting on the ground, fermenting in their own juices, leaking their sugars into the earth. Black flies hovered like thick veils on the sweating fruit while trellised vines looked down on the streets of Freiburg that were empty save for a woman being escorted toward the local inn, her face drenched in fear. The man beside her, holding her arm, was stone-faced, but fear also filled his eyes. He refused to look at the woman as she pulled back, trying to extricate her arm.

“Please,” she cried. “There was some mistake. I’m not next.”

“Yes, you are,” was his harsh reply. “Your name was chosen by the committee. Think of it this way, what you do today may save the rest of us.”

“We’re all dead. You’re just prolonging the inevitable!”

“Maybe. But better a few more days than none at all.”

“A few days for you.” She cast him a scathing glare full of spite and struggled harder, but could not escape. Another man and a woman came out of the tavern to help pull her along.

“Volker, you must stop this.” A thin, aging man with reddish blond hair ran toward the group, desperate and angry, stepping purposefully in front of them.

“This is none of your concern, Matthias.” Volker turned furiously on the older man, but Matthias held his ground.

“Then take me instead. Let her go.”

“They don’t want you,” Volker sneered. “They want a woman.”

With that they dragged her to the inn, closing the door and sealing them inside the building. The interior was dark and stank of stale ale, sweat, and something more pungent. Men and women slumped dejectedly in chairs. All were filthy and weak. On the floor lay four bodies.

The newly arrived woman recognized one of the bodies. “Johan!” She couldn’t go to him as she was dragged toward the bar where three lean vampires sat waiting. She went limp and wept.

A trio of gaudily dressed vampires held an eccentric court. Their skin was akin to alabaster and nearly translucent in the dim light of the tavern. The nearest one, tall and poised, draped in a dark green velvet cape with tight riding breeches that disappeared into high, black, shiny boots, turned to regard the woman.

“Ahh, she’s a ripe one.”

Another vampire wearing only fine linen trousers sniffed the air and licked his lips. “Volker always brings us the finest choices. You’ve chosen well.”

The man who had escorted the woman gave an exaggerated bow along with a shudder he could not suppress. He pushed her ahead to divert the piercing eyes of the triumvirate.

A third vampire slipped to his feet with eager intent. His fingers were laden with jeweled rings. With an effortless leap, he floated over the bar and landed in front of the woman. The vampire studied her before luxuriously sniffing the air around her, ending at her neck. Salty tears leaked from her eyes as she remained fixed on the bodies at her feet. She waited for the inevitable.

The door of the inn opened slowly, causing everyone to turn their heads and blink into the light. In the doorway stood a tall, lean figure dressed in a vintage rifleman tunic, grey cavalry breeches with red piping down the side, and high leather boots. His head was wrapped in a scarf, like a desert bandit, obscuring his face. Over his eyes he wore smoked glasses.

The three vampires crouched and hissed, followed by an audible gasp from the people in the room.

“The Greyfriar,” someone whispered, as if saying the man’s name would make him vanish like an apparition. Another said it almost like a prayer.

The newcomer took in the room, his gaze stopping on the vampires. The one closest to the woman stepped back to join his companions behind the bar.

The Greyfriar did not say a word as he slowly approached them. Walking past the woman, he stepped between her and the hissing vampires. It was not a sound of distaste or anger; instead, it was a language. These days, vampires used their old tongue only when surprised or when they didn’t want to be understood by humans, preferring an eclectic mixture of human languages.

“He’s alone,” hissed the bare-chested one, rallying his companions.

“He’s always alone,” retorted the cloaked vampire. “It makes no difference. He kills us as though we are infants. We should flee.”

“This town is ours!” the one wearing rings exclaimed. “We will defend it.”

“But where are the others? They should have intercepted him.” This from the hesitant one.

“How he got past the others is unimportant. There are three of us here.”

Casually, the Greyfriar leaned his elbows upon the bar and remarked in perfect German. “When you are finished debating your options, you should know that you are already dead.”

The three vampires shrank back another step. The fearful one looked about wildly for an escape route.

The swordsman added, “Your friends are all dead. I killed them as they gorged. They died far too easily, actually.”

They attacked, flinging themselves into the air over the bar. Greyfriar stepped back and drew his sword. The pistol, already in his other hand, lifted and fired. The bare-chested vampire shifted at the last moment, obviously familiar with fighting armed humans. The bullet struck him in the shoulder and should have flung him back, but he

altered his density at the last second and landed heavily in front of Greyfriar. Claws extended, he swiped as Greyfriar ducked and kicked the vampire aside. The masked man turned quickly, protecting himself from the attacks of the others. His rapier ripped into the onrushing vampires, connecting once, twice, again and again. The vampires darted out of range of the weapon's bite, their bodies streaming blood from the vicious wounds they did not feel. The skin of vampires, though flesh, was desensitized—making them incredibly hard to stop.

Greyfriar's pistol fired again, hitting one of the vampires in the heart. It staggered forward a few steps, reaching with its jeweled hands, before realizing it was dead. Then it dropped to the floor amid the human bodies.

The wounded one sprang back into the fight, and Greyfriar's sword swung up, aiming for the vampire's neck. It would have been a killing blow, but the creature veered again and the sword slashed its arm, which was nearly severed by the force. The vampire was sacrificing its limb to avoid more serious damage. It stood again and ran at the Greyfriar, its useful arm raised, displaying its deadly claws ready to disembowel.

The swordsman sidestepped the attack and then spun, driving the sword into the spinal column at the base of the neck, shoving the vampire downward. The body flopped to the ground, twitching uncontrollably.

The Greyfriar turned to the final vampire, the nervous one. The vampire held out its arms in supplication.

"Wait!" it shouted in German.

Greyfriar worked his blade free as he regarded the pile of dead humans on the floor, some only half-drained of their blood. "Do not expect pity from me."

The vampire's ice blue eyes filled with terror, as he inched toward the open door. When the Greyfriar did not advance on him, he bolted.

In a burst of speed no human eye could follow, Greyfriar rushed the fleeing vampire. One hand grabbed the collar of the velvet cape and threw the creature back into the room. The vampire didn't fall to the ground, however, but twisted in midair as its density changed, alighting on the far wall, hissing loudly.

Humans nearby scrambled out of the way, stampeding from the inn.

Soon the room was empty except for the combatants, the littered dead and dying, and the woman who still stood rooted to the floor, her eyes glued to the skirmish.

“Run,” Greyfriar shouted at her.

The swordsman ducked under the first feral swipe of the creature’s extended claws. The talons caught a corner of his head wrap and partially ripped it off his head, leaving his long black hair exposed. A quick hand held the lower portion over his chin and mouth.

Stepping back, Greyfriar slashed at the vampire, and the tip of his blade caught the muscle of the creature’s abdomen. Blood spurted, but the thing didn’t even flinch, only spun around and came again, giving no quarter to the swordsman. Greyfriar twisted to avoid the attack, but this time the vampire didn’t turn back. The swordsman charged, but not fast enough, and the vampire grabbed the shell-shocked woman by the throat, its claws digging deep but not breaking skin. The creature pulled her between him and Greyfriar, stopping his advance.

“I will kill her!” the creature hissed in a mix of German and its own language.

“Then your life is forfeit.”

“It will be regardless!”

“You have a choice.”

The vampire hesitated a moment. “The Greyfriar never leaves any alive! You mean you would let me go?”

“No one has ever asked.” The swordsman lowered his weapon as he repaired his torn scarf.

The vampire stood stunned. “All I have to do is ask and you would spare my life?” Ever so slightly his hand loosened from around the woman’s throat, and she took a gasping breath.

“Your actions will dictate my response. Harm the female and I will kill you. Release her and we will discuss this further.”

The eyes of the vampire darted wildly. Greyfriar’s face, covered in cloth and smoked glass, offered no clue to his intent. The muscles in the vampire’s jaw twitched, then hardened. He backed toward the door. “You lie.”

Greyfriar’s rapier rose again. “Don’t be foolish. There is nowhere for you to go.”

The vampire dragged the woman to the frame of the door, smelling freedom beyond. Blood dripped steadily to the floor from the slash in his belly. His nostrils flared and his fangs showed as his mouth yawned open. The hunger rose.

“Don’t,” ordered Greyfriar, recognizing the signs. He knew the wound was not severe enough to warrant hunger. It was instinct and fear driving the vampire; fear of not being at full strength to fight an unbeatable foe. Greyfriar lowered his sword again. “You have no need to feed. I will not harm you if you release the woman.”

Steely, desperate eyes glinted. “It is your fault I am weakened. She dies because of you!” His teeth flashed.

With that, Greyfriar raised his pistol and shot the vampire through the jaw, inches from the woman’s head. The creature flew backward and the woman crumpled to the ground, trembling. Greyfriar leapt over her to plunge his sword into the heart of the still-twitching creature. He yanked it out almost angrily.

He turned to the dazed woman and helped her to her feet. “I told you to run.” Her dark eyes turned toward him. His irritation abated. The woman stood on shaking legs and he took a moment to comfort her. “You’re safe now.”

“My husband,” she moaned, stepping toward the pile of bodies.

Greyfriar could smell which body had her scent on it. He was long dead. “I’m sorry. But you still live.” It brought her little consolation.

“Not for long,” she whispered angrily, caught up in her grief. “You’ll soon leave us and we’ll be left alone again to be ravaged by more of their kind. What good are you?” Despair laced her voice, but she was right.

“I cannot be everywhere. I am truly sorry.”

Some of the braver villagers peered in, checking the outcome of the battle. Greyfriar waved them inside after making sure his mask was back in place.

The man named Volker approached Greyfriar and greeted him familiarly, clapping him on the back. “The Greyfriar has saved us!” he announced loudly. “Just in the nick of time. I’m glad my letter reached you.”

Greyfriar's emotionless gaze fell upon him. The man stank of fear and lies. "I received no such letter. I know what's been going on here. You opted to sacrifice your own kind."

Volker hesitated, but then blurted out, "We had no choice. They would have just slaughtered us all without some sort of order, so we came up with a system."

"Which you controlled. Were you even in the game? Was your family?"

Volker pulled back, his shame plain. "I ran the lottery. Someone had to." The townspeople glared at him. The woman beside Greyfriar stepped up to Volker and slapped him hard across the mouth.

"It should be you lying there dead instead of Johan."

Volker sputtered and looked pleadingly around at the swordsman. "I only did what I thought was best for the town."

Greyfriar motioned to the older man with the ginger beard. He had witnessed this man's act of selflessness. "What's your name?"

"Matthias." The man was haggard but had an air of calm, with authority in his voice.

"Matthias, this town now answers to you until you come up with some new rule of your own. These people need your help and your compassion."

"Wait a minute." Volker shoved himself between them. "I'm the authority here!"

Greyfriar turned on him. "No longer." He addressed the crowd. "The punishment for his crime will be decided by you. Let justice be done here."

"You can't do that! I only did what I thought was best!" Volker pleaded, looking around for supporters. None stepped forward.

Matthias gathered a group of men to help move the bodies. The woman who had been spared followed her husband out in the morbid procession.

Greyfriar went outside to the cheering of the appreciative town. But the woman's words still echoed. For the first time in many years, he wondered the same thing. How effective could one man be? Stories and legends always made it sound plausible, but there were so many he couldn't save, so many towns where he arrived too late. Still, he would

never stop. Long gone were his foolish dreams of dashing heroics. Now all that remained were nightmares of what might have happened if he had arrived too late to save one woman. Adele. Just the thought of her made his numb body ache.

People touched him, both lightly and some a tad harder, all gestures of gratitude, but he felt none of them. He walked among them, slowly cheered by their smiling faces. A small child walked alongside him, clasping his gloved hand, and tugging insistently. They followed him to the town's edge, their eyes gradually saddening with the knowledge that he was already leaving. He had seen it time and time again; every village was the same. Tomorrow they would be left alone to fend for themselves, and the fear and the uncertainty would return.

He hated to leave them; he hated to leave all of the towns, but he had to return to Edinburgh. It had already been far too long since he had stepped on his home soil. His own flock needed him, since they were just as much at risk as these towns on the occupied continent.

Matthias suddenly appeared in front of him. "We have no way to express our gratitude."

"It is not necessary."

"Of course it is," he insisted. "We would all be dead eventually. We have nothing to offer you but our thanks."

Greyfriar inclined his head graciously. This speech was not uncommon either. Many times they offered gifts. Food. Wine. Books. Cows. Most of it was useless to him. He spied a movement in Matthias's coat pocket, and up popped a small, white head. A cat, or more exactly a kitten. It was very small and bedraggled. Greyfriar reached to rub its head and it purred immediately.

Matthias grinned, extracting the tiny creature. "Perhaps we have something for you after all." Thick, gnarled fingers tousled the kitten's fur as it curled up in his large hands. "Her mother and siblings are gone. She is the last of her litter." He held out the kitten to Greyfriar.

The swordsman smiled, but shook his head. "I have a long journey ahead of me."

"And a companion would make it go faster. She is quite independent." He perched the kitten on the Greyfriar's shoulder and imme-

diately the kitten dug in her claws and nestled against the soft scarf at his neck. The little boy beside him giggled.

Greyfriar regarded the lad. "Do you think I should keep her?" He tried to smile, though it was a gesture lost on the boy. Still, his cold, hidden features did not frighten. The child nodded vigorously. Greyfriar turned to Matthias. "Then I shall. Thank you."

Pleased, the older man reached out and clasped him on the opposite shoulder. "Such a small gesture in light of all that you have done for us. But our homes are always welcome to you."

Greyfriar turned to go, but the woman from the inn touched him lightly on the arm. He didn't notice her and walked on past, but Matthias saw it and stopped him.

"Brigida would say something to you, sir."

Greyfriar turned back.

The woman struggled to find her voice through her anguish and embarrassment. "I wanted to say thank you as well. I didn't mean what I said before. I was angry."

"You had the right. I will do what I can to make sure this does not happen again."

"I know you will. And I understand, you are only one man."

"I'm not even that," he replied quietly, and extracted himself from the crowd, heading for the wooded countryside. The kitten dozed next to his ear, its eyes narrowed to half slits. For the first time in a long while, he felt a bit closer to Adele. He rubbed the tiny cat's head, which lifted as the kitten meowed piteously. It pawed at the fringe of his ruined scarf, pulling it down from over his chin. Greyfriar grinned.

"Perhaps I should name you Adele."



Edinburgh Castle perched on the top of a foreboding mountain of stone under a stormy sky. No lights blazed from its windows. It was silent and empty. The city below it, however, was warm and inviting in the darkness, where windows let soft light break through the gloom.

Inside the dark halls of the castle, a tall, thin figure walked toward

an outer door. A multitude of cats followed after him and circled his legs, bare below his kilt. Baudoin scowled at his escorts. Somehow they always knew when their master would return, their senses just as attuned as his to the prince's arrival.

The heavy door creaked open to admit Gareth, the vampire prince of Edinburgh. Gone now was the soft, grey garb of the Greyfriar, replaced with a stark white shirt and black tuxedo coat with tails.

"Welcome home, my lord." Baudoin bowed, allowing his relief to show at the safe return of his sovereign. Edinburgh was a lonely place for vampires, as Gareth and he were the only two in residence in all of Scotland.

The mob of cats swirled nosily around the two figures, who had to speak louder over their cries of greeting.

"It's good to be home, my friend," answered Gareth, handing over his Greyfriar disguise and weaponry. "I'll be heading out before dawn. There is news of another group of clan outlaws setting up outside Ghent."

Baudoin scowled and wrinkled his nose at the stench of dried human blood on his master's body. Gareth applied it to himself when he was Greyfriar to disguise his scent from his own kind. It was a disgusting tactic, but it kept him safe. Baudoin had long since refrained from voicing complaints about his prince's foolish activities. They never held sway. In any case, Gareth would not be able to pursue more bandits for the time being. "Your excursions will have to wait. While you were gone, I received a messenger from your brother."

Gareth's face tightened. "Cesare? What does he want?"

"There is a clan gathering in London. Your presence is required."

Gareth narrowed his eyes. "Again? I've spent more time in London in the past few months than in the last one hundred years."

Baudoin gave a twisted smile. "How delightful that you and your brother are playmates again."

"Hardly. I just want to keep an eye on him and whatever he's planning. And I want to be near Father, now that's he's . . . failing. But I feel as if I've been neglecting my work as Greyfriar, not being as useful as I could."

The servant patted his master's arm gently. Then a flash of white on

Gareth's shoulder startled Baudoin. It was a tiny cat, and a pathetic creature at that. It yawned and stretched. The servant's eyes widened. "Really? Another one?"

"It was a gift."

"You didn't have to accept it."

The cats below caught the scent of the new arrival and stood up on their hind legs to get a sniff. The small kitten had already doubled in size from the journey to Scotland. Indecision tore at the kitten as it caught a glimpse of its new home. Its ears flicked forward and then flat again. It meowed and hunched closer to Gareth's neck.

"It does not want to be here," Baudoin responded, eyeing the feline.

"It is young and frightened." He reached a hand to stroke her reassuringly, smoothing down the fur that rose in its fright. "As with all things, one must go slowly. Life's not about rushing. There is much to enjoy if you take the time to find it and nurture it." Gareth knelt, bringing the kitten lower and allowing the other cats to investigate under his supervision. The kitten felt safer where she was, and she hissed.

Gareth laughed and stood, heading for the kitchen. "Perhaps Morgana can find you something delicious to eat, little one." The kitten sunk in her claws and settled down for the ride, as she had done all through her travels with the Greyfriar.

Baudoin raised an eyebrow after him and called out, "Will this infatuation with helpless creatures ever end?"

"No," came the immediate reply.

The servant sighed and followed his liege.