

THE GEOMANCER

Vampire Empire
A Gareth and Adele Novel
by
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EXCERPT

A shadow crossed the starry sky over London and fell upon an old man. His strangled cry broke the silence. The nearby crowd shifted away from him and huddled closer together.

The shadow lifted its face from its prey's neck, sharp teeth glinting white in the light of the swollen moon overhead. Its head dipped down again to drink from the moaning victim. Blood pooled in the hollow of the man's gasping throat. The horrible shape rose from the bleeding man and moved to stalk a fresh meal.

Suddenly a blade flashed bright and struck the vampire in the base of the spine. It let out a screech as it arched backward and twisted. Adele lifted her sword high to strike again. She was dressed in supple leather and rich cloth, unlike the ragged herd that stood placidly watching. Determination tightened her face as she struck. Steel sliced through the muscle of the vampire's left arm. No scream of pain fell from its lips. Instead it lunged at the woman, the claws on its hand ripping her thick skirt, tearing it at the knees in an attempt to cripple her.

It was a clumsy attack. Adele's dark eyes flashed with confusion. This vampire moved more sluggishly than its kind typically did, but not from the wounds she had given it. Such cuts should've been paltry to the creature; hardly felt by a vampire. But in this case,

its motions were slower than usual. It almost writhed with some sort of palsy affliction.

Adele spun aside, bringing out a second weapon. The dagger's wicked curved blade glowed green and sizzled as it drove into the vampire's arm, cutting it straight to the bone and carving out a fair chunk of flesh. The beast staggered and stumbled over the body of its victim. It recovered and ran. Adele sped after the vampire and the milling humans broke apart like a wave, letting the combatants pass without lifting a hand to help or hinder. These remnants of the vampires' herds remained the easiest of prey. It made sense that this was the area where the creature had been hunting. It didn't make sense that the vampire existed here at all, but Adele put that out of her mind for more immediate needs.

She raced through the overgrown woods of old Hyde Park, leaping over chipped, ivy-covered marble benches in an attempt to match speed with the vampire. It dove for the shadows of the deep woods and Adele plunged in after it, pulling her arms close to avoid the tangled and overgrown branches. She hacked at some that loomed too close to her face. Then she was through to a clearing and the vampire spun to a halt, facing her.

Adele's lips held a grin of victory until she saw numerous glowing eyes behind her quarry. A pack of vampires crept forward to join their brethren. She only had time for a shocked cry at the impossibility when they surged at her all at once, their tattered clothing flapping like ghosts.

Adele raised her blades to meet the snarling horde. Dodging under the swipe of the first one, she thrust up into the heart of the second. Her other arm swung backward and cut deep into the back of the vampire that had overshot her. Others reached for her with fierce claws and gaping jaws. She kicked one in the face and heard teeth shatter. Each thrust of her weapons drew blood, but she knew she

would soon be overwhelmed.

From high in the canopy of trees, a silhouette dropped, barely visible against the forest of deep shadows. There was a definitive shudder amongst the vampires. They threw themselves away as a cloaked swordsman alighted next to Adele with rapier and pistol clutched in his hands.

One of the vampires whispered, "The Greyfriar."

"I found them!" Adele exclaimed, gasping and grateful for the respite.

"You have a singular knack," came the man's calm response.

"What can I say? I attract them."

If the man returned her grin, it was hidden. A grey wool scarf was wrapped around his head, except for his eyes, and they were covered by mirrored glasses. He wore the outdated jacket of a Napoleonic rifleman, with its gold piping across the front, and the high black boots of a dragoon. He seemed an odd mishmash of adventurers' costumes.

The vampires regained a bit of nerve, or realized their desperate plight. There was no escape now. It was fight or die. They summoned their nerve and growled at the two interlopers.

"We need one alive." Adele warned.

"As you wish." Greyfriar waded into the mob. His blade moved with a speed that Adele could not match even on her best day. Every story written about him couldn't capture his graceful killing strokes that rose and fell with a fluid system of iambic pentameter. Greyfriar dispatched one of his attackers, obliterating the creature's heart with

a twist of his blade. It wasn't out of cruelty but because he knew such damage to a major organ was virtually the only way to assure it would stay down. As the vampire fell backward, another came in its place. This one too was dropped, with a bullet to the brain. One by one, the beasts fell in the face of the onslaught. Creatures moved to attack from behind, but Greyfriar didn't react. Either he didn't see them, or he trusted Adele implicitly.

Adele contented herself by dispatching the stragglers that scrambled out of the way of Greyfriar's deadly blade work. Her own weapons aimed for the heart.

Finally, only two remained. Adele doubled over, sucking in breath. The vampires saw their salvation and fled.

Greyfriar cursed and raised his pistol, but stopped when he saw a knowing smile on Adele's face. "Did you allow that?"

"I am a little winded, but yes, we need to know if there are more of them in the city, and where they are hiding. So don't lose them!" Adele lurched after the vampires.

Greyfriar darted on her heels, easily keeping pace. Their boots crunched along the streets of London. Grass and roots pushed up through the cracks in the ancient pavement.

The two vampires took to the air, drifting up above the trees toward the largely deserted buildings to the south. Their flight was erratic, as if struggling to control their quivering limbs that threatened to steer them off course.

Ahead of Adele was the ruin of a memorial arch and, beyond, another heavy, nearly impassable forest that had once been charming Green Park. She ran along the only open path available, the old broken road of Constitution Hill. On her right was the scorched,

cratered wasteland where Buckingham Palace had once stood.

Adele and Greyfriar continued west down the center of a stately tree-lined avenue, now overgrown and wild. Greyfriar raced ahead. Then he veered to the right, shot through the trees, and leapt to a ruined building, scurrying effortlessly up its side. He was on the slate roof in seconds and legging after the sailing vampires across the jagged landscape of peaks and chimneys.

Forced to take a slower path, Adele ran all the harder to keep them in view. She was truly laboring now, hardly in prime fighting shape. A razor sharp pain cut into her side with each ragged breath. She lost sight of her quarry in the high spires of steeples and towers, but then glimpsed Greyfriar's fluttering cloak against the stars.

She stumbled over a large mound of garbage and her boots kicked into a pile of burnt bones. A blackened skull rolled ahead. Her stride stumbled as the face turned toward her, showing the sharp needle canines grinning at her.

Adele recoiled. In her first trip to London nearly two years ago as a captive of the fearsome British vampire clan, the pile of cadavers would have been human. Now the dead scattered around were all vampires, all members of that very clan. Gareth's clan. Slaughtered by her. Forcing herself past the telltale bones, Adele pushed west with legs pounding, but the horrific image of the countless charnel piles across Britain haunted her.

Greyfriar appeared suddenly in front of her. "Gareth!" she shouted as she clutched his arms in relief, unmindful that she had used his true name in human territory.

"Are you all right?" Greyfriar's head tilted in concern as his hand lifted to hold her.

“Did you lose them?” Adele prayed he didn’t feel her shaking, She immediately regretted her accusatory tone.

“Of course not,” he offered calmly. “They disappeared into a ruin on the far side of the river. I came back to get you. Against my better judgment.”

Adele’s regret at her sharp response quickly fled. “We’ve discussed this already.”

“Discussing and agreeing are two different things. Your geomancy is useless here.”

Adele shook her head. They moved past the dark bulk of Big Ben and Parliament onto Westminster Bridge. Finally, she had enough wind to say, “They’re real, aren’t they? Vampires in Britain again.”

“Yes.”

“We need answers. People are scared, and I don’t blame them. They’d just gotten used to the idea that they were free. I promised these people safety.” Adele hissed angrily, “Vampires shouldn’t be here. They shouldn’t be able to set foot in Britain without withering. There’s only one vampire who should be able to live here, and that’s you.”

Greyfriar had no answers for her, and he wasn’t prone to abstract speculation. They left the bridge for the bleak landscape of Lambeth. He hardly glanced at the scattered bones of his clan that littered the streets. Adele wondered how he could remain so impassive.

They rounded a corner and Adele stopped at the sight of a dome rising above scraggly trees. Beyond a partially tumbled wall,

and through the twisted trunks of a gloomy forest, she could see a sprawling building. It was a heavy institutional pile, devoid of art, thick and immobile, with an air of anger. She got a chill.

“They went in there?” Adele asked.

“Yes.” Greyfriar shoved aside the ruined metal gate and slipped among the trees.

“Shouldn’t we find a less obtrusive way inside?” Adele quickly followed. She studied the dark woods for more shining eyes. Their feet crunched in the gravel as they approached the portico.

Adele looked up at the heavy pediment. In carved letters discolored by moss, she read Royal Bethlehem Hospital. She suppressed a gasp.

“Bedlam,” she whispered.

“What?”

“I’ve heard of this place. It was a famous asylum.”

“Are you still going in?”

“Of course.”