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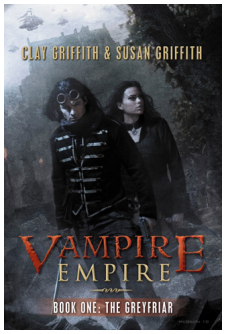
There are a number of books that deal with the idea of vampires overtaking human civilization—the recent Guilermo Del Toro/Chuck Hogan STRAIN trilogy, for example—but VAMPIRE EMPIRE (Buzzy Multimedia), an audiobook written by Clay and Susan Griffiths and read by James Marsters, has a number of unique elements.

For one thing, as we quickly realize in the first volume, THE GREYFRIAR, VAMPIRE EMPIRE takes place in an alternate history, in a year 2020 where Egypt is a major world power, air travel is commonly done in zeppelins, and vampires have their own species and civilization. This doesn't mean that vampires and humans are cohabiting, amiably or otherwise (*à la*, say, TRUE BLOOD). The vampires rule most of the northern hemisphere and regard humans as expendable cattle. The humans, who have their own kingdoms and governments in the southern hemisphere, view the vampires as barbaric monsters.



The human Princess Adele, young heir to the vast Equatorian Empire, is on a royal airship that's attacked off the coast of France. She is rescued from the vampire warriors by the mysterious Greyfriar, who promises to get Adele back to her kingdom. Adele's father the king assumes his daughter has been abducted by vampires (which was the intent of the attack) and ruthless female vamp warrior Flay leads the search for the escaped princess, while the prospect of all-out war ramps up between the more technologically advanced humans and the brutal vampire forces escalates.

The horror factor here is multifaceted, with some humans in vampire-controlled areas living in hopeless herds, others existing warily in villages and still others fairly comfortable under the protection of benevolent vampire Prince Gareth. In the VAMPIRE EMPIRE universe, the bloodsuckers are an actual breed, born rather than made (there are some intriguing complications to being a vampire mother), and are distinguishable from humans at a glance. They can fly and are unconcerned with religious symbols, though they are susceptible to certain types of magic (which exists here, though few believe in it). They are also satisfactorily violent, slashing, draining and dismembering as they go along. As far as graphic details go, let's say it's less extreme than Charlie Huston and more than Charlaine Harris.

The characterizations are well-drawn, although the archetypes aren't wholly unfamiliar. The style here is more adventure in a frightening place than pure terror, but the clawed, fanged vampires are consistently interesting in their internal power struggles and external marauding.

Marsters, whose vampire history encompasses playing Spike on BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER and ANGEL, does a fine job of putting across all of the various emotions. He also takes on a wide variety of accents and personas, with a kind and commonsensical voice for Prince Gareth, a Southern swagger for Adele's betrothed (the arrogant war hero Senator Clark), an easy softness for Adele herself and a surprisingly persuasive dominatrix mode for Flay. (About the only thing we *don't* hear from him is Spike's voice.)

Putting vampires, royal dynasties, steampunk and alternate histories together is a bold enterprise, but the Griffiths prove up to the task. THE GREYFRIAR is a solid, engaging work. As the first of an announced VAMPIRE EMPIRE trilogy, it deserves to be heard and induces eagerness for the next installment.