



The sequel to *Geist*

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Chapter One

A thing of beauty

In the Imperial Palace Grand Duchess Zofiya slept on sheets of polished, white satin in a grand bed painted and carved like a sailing ship. Around her gleamed the treasures of her brother's and father's dominions.

These, however, did not guarantee her a night of peaceful slumber. Her long, black hair lay in a sweaty tangle, while her tawny limbs were twisted in the covers. Nightmares crashed through her head, breaking her famous calm in ways that would have surprised any of her Imperial Guard had they been privileged enough to witness it.

Finally Zofiya jerked awake, lurching upright in her bed with a half-swallowed scream. Her hand instinctively went to the medallion around her neck as she tried to control her rapid breathing.

The bedroom was nearly silent; there were only the fine curtains blowing in the wind, and far off in the corridor the sounds of the many clocks ticking away to themselves. That noise was familiar and calming; her brother had inherited the love of machinery from their father.

Still what she was not used to were nightmares. In this one a person had been killing Kal, and she had been unable to reach him in time. That was her deepest fear.

Her brother the Emperor was a great man, but his sense of personal safety was limited. He firmly believed that he had tamed this continent and the worst was behind them. Zofiya knew better.

Slipping from her elaborate bed, the Grand Duchess padded to the window and looked out over the sleeping city—not realizing that she had failed to let go of the medallion. Thousands of lights twinkled all over the lagoon. The bridges were

reduced to a string of bright pearls. Even the slum areas of the Edge were smoothed to attractiveness by darkness and the occasional gleam of a street-light. Directly below she could make out not only her own Imperial Guard at their posts, but also the swathed forms of the soldiers from Chioma.

The delegation had been in the capital for a month, testing the waters for a marriage between the Emperor and Ezefia, daughter of the Prince of that distant principality. No promises had been made, but she knew Kal was entertaining the idea. The throne had to be secured quickly, and Onika, the Prince of Chioma was fabulously wealthy.

Kal might have preferred the group marriage of Delmaire, but he was wise enough not to try and push them on the citizens of Arykam.

Such things took time, but at least this city was changing. It was not as majestic as Toth, her father's capital, but it was pulling itself out of generations of misery and torment. All of which was her brother's doing. Yet there were plenty who wanted to stop him.

Zofiya clenched her fist on the curved edge of the medallion until it hurt. She had lost the one she brought from Delmaire a week before in the training ground. No amount of sifting the sand—which she had gotten the servants to do—had located it.

However, when she had come in that evening, this new one was lying on her pillow. It was not the same; there were five diamonds set in the snaking curve of stone that represented Hatipai's constantly moving nature, and it was larger than the one she had lost. Some aristocrat had probably had it made to curry favor.

In Court her faith was an open secret. Though she kept her medallion tucked inside her clothes during daylight hours, she would not deny her goddess. So if the people around Zofiya wanted to gossip, then she had no way of stopping them.

The little gods were not persecuted, but they were a figure of amusement and derision. Nearly a thousand years was a long time to hold onto faith in the face of derisive public opinion, but the sect of Hatipai that the Grand Duchess subscribed to had managed it.

Kal knew—though it was not something he dismissed as superstitious nonsense. When the geists had come and the Otherside had been poured in, most of the population had lost faith—including the royal family of Delmaire. Zofiya was made of sterner stuff.

Yet, now as she looked out over the city, her mind turned to the dark realities of the world—and most especially the events that had occurred under the ossuary.

“The Murashev,” Zofiya shivered under her spider-silk nightdress, as if even mentioning the geistlord’s name would bring its arrival. Only month’s before the creature had almost been bought forth into the heart of Vermillion—an event the city would not have survived. She had been at the secret briefing from the new Arch Abbot and had shared her brother’s shock. “Hatipai, give us strength,” she murmured.

That was when she heard it; a clatter of pure notes, like those from the bells of the Temple in Delmaire. She recalled them clearly, because even as a child she had spent much time there. The bells had been strung in long skeins across the doors so that each penitent that went in made them ring, high and sweet.

When she heard the cluster of notes again, the Grand Duchess spun about. It was not one of the clocks in the hall. Something was afoot in the Palace.

After slipping on her coat, she strode over, took her belt and scabbard from the chair close to her bed, strapped it on, and went out to investigate. She had already dismissed her personal guards for the night. If trouble was going to come to one of the Imperial siblings, she wanted it to be her and not her brother.

Growing up in Delmaire, she had been used to the fact that she would always be the surplus child. Kal had wanted her to come, and their father had not protested. He had daughters enough to fill a royal barge—all of them far more compliant than she.

Beyond her rooms, the hallway was lined with lush carpets woven in red and yellow—Imperial colors that Zofiya found far too garish.

The sound came again, and this time it could be clearly heard over the numerous clocks ticking gently to themselves on this floor. With one hand on her sword hilt, Zofiya went down the back stairs and out into the courtyard. The bells rang again this time in the greyness of the garden. The warmth in the goddess symbol spurred her on, through the mist shrouded topiaries and flower-beds. Finally she reached the walls of the palace. The bells rang a third time, so she found herself sneaking out of the postern gate and into the city itself.

The Grand Duchess was not frightened, even if she was only wearing her great coat and her nightclothes. She had her goddess with her. The warmth of the medallion, and the sound of distant bells led her on. In bare feet she crossed over the Bridge of Gilt and into the Tinker's Quarter. Under her brother's patronage the Guild had grown in power, and many of the houses here were nearly as grand as those on the Imperial island. Yet, Zofiya took no notice of fine architecture or well tended gardens. Instead she followed as bidden, until she reached a house at the end of Piston Street. The sound of bells now led her around the rear of the property to an open door. She paused for a moment, for the first time noticing the deep shadows, and feeling eyes within them moving. For an instant she realised how vulnerable she was, but then the tide of her faith washed back. She entered, walked confidentially down the stairs, and into the basement. Let the contents of the shadows look to themselves.

It smelled very strange here; musty and dank, but she stepped over the piles of soil, barely noticing her grubby feet, and towards a magnificent brass door. That such a thing would exist in the home of a tinker Zofiya didn't question.

Inside she did pause though. The corridor she was in was unlike any tradesman's house she'd ever seen. It was covered in frescos that rivalled decorations in her brother's palace. Neither did the theme of the artwork slip past her notice; it was something not often depicted. The Break—the arrival of the geists and the revelation of the Otherside. The Grand Duchess tilted her head, and let one of her fingers trace the outline of the design.

Here were the population screaming and cowering as shapes stepped through the gap. Zofiya padded on a little further, where she found the rising of the dead, and the arrival of the spirits to haunt their loved ones. Circles of rei lead the innocent to their deaths. Spectyrs brought retribution on those who had wronged them.

A little gasp escaped her when she reached the final frame in the frieze. Here was displayed the Season of Supplication—the final nail in the coffin of faith. Believers of all religions were shown gathered around a central point, blood pouring from knees they had been on for weeks, while they raised their hands to the gods.

No salvation had come. And afterwards those that had been revered and trusted were referred to ever after as little gods. Zofiya felt tears well up, and she couldn't remember when that had last happened. Her goddess' temple had at least survived. Many others had fallen into ruin when their followers abandoned them all together.

Yet, she had faith, she had belief, and she would never give up. The thought was warm and comforting. As she leaned against the frieze, she smiled softly.

Something moved behind her hand, like the shift of a snake, smooth and sinuous under palm.

Taking a step back, Zofiya watched as the ancient art work flexed and twisted. The supplicants' self-inflicted wounds oozed blood, while fresh tears streamed from their eyes, rolled down the wall, and pattered on the floor. Above the symbols of the gods boiled, grey and thick like thunderclouds, yet among them she recognized one. Hatipai. Her goddess' symbol gleamed gold and bright among the others.

The Grand Duchess' smile broadened as she reached out and touched it. Instantly she was filled with glory. Her head snapped back, and she let out a groan of pleasure that went right to her core. All physical delights paled in comparison to this one. No aristocrat or Prince could make her feel like this. The goddess was with her, and she was pleased that her daughter had held her faith when some many others faltered.

The symbol moved again, and Zofiya followed it, barely aware of the steps passing under her feet. Her deity whispered into her soul.

Together they went down deeper into the earth, two more flights of stairs, and then the frieze stopped at a blank wall of stone. Zofiya leaned forward and touched it. When the medallion grew hotter on her skin, the Grand Duchess was not surprised.

The walls were smooth white stone, fitted so tightly together she could not have slipped even her narrowest blade between them. Though she had no torch, Zofiya had no fear of stumbling, for tiny weirstones embedded in the walls let off a cool blue light. She should have been afraid at this flagrant use of those dangerous power receptacles, but she knew the goddess would not let her acolyte fall.

Beneath her fingers the gold symbol travelled on, and the Grand Duchess followed in her wake—feeling more content and calm than she ever had in her life.

The frieze had changed though. Now it showed only abstract forms, shapes of birds and animals—but nothing human. She would have stopped to examine them if she had been alone, but the goddess still held her dazzled.

She went on until she came to a small side room. Here the stone was polished to such a high sheen that Zofiya had to avert her eyes, while under her fingertips the symbol of Hatipai faded. The removal of the goddess was painful, but she did not cry.

Hatipai must have bought her here for a good reason. Shielding her eyes from the glare, Zofiya looked around. The chamber was bare of any furniture; the blank piece of stone that gleamed so brightly was the sole focus of the space. Something inside the Grand Duchess told her that to go forward armed and proud was not the thing to do. This was the goddess' place.

Taking off her sword belt and laying it by the door, Zofiya dropped to her knees and shuffled forward, mimicking the gestures of those long ago penitents. Reaching the gleaming stone, she laid her fingers against it and bowed her head.

The light bloomed around her, so bright that even through closed eyelids it burned. When it faded, Zofiya risked opening them again.

The stone was transformed into the finest sheet of rock crystal. Beyond was something that made her sit back on her heels and gape like a child who had just seen her first dirigible.

An angel waited on the other side. Its form was wreathed in light, so that it was hard to discern much beyond the humanoid shape—but behind trailed wings, fine as silk, fluttering in ethereal winds.

It was a sight so beautiful that Zofiya felt instant hot tears coursing down her cheeks, and yet she sensed something else. For as the light dimmed a fraction more she was able to see a dark sword in the creature's white hand. Now when she glanced

up, its eyes were staring back into hers. They were beautiful but pitiless. In them Zofiya could feel herself being judged, weighed, measured, and held to account.

Suddenly she questioned every action in her life, every misstep, every harsh word, for this angel was no creature of kindness.

Kindness leads to weakness, child.

The voice in her head was a whisper: a murmur in the night.

You, of all people in this city, are a creature of faith. We have searched long for one of your kind.

“I’m not worthy of your attentions.” Zofiya bowed her head and meant every word of it. Daughter of kings, with a lineage stretching back to the beginning of civilization she might be, yet in the presence of this angel she felt as common as a pig-farmer.

That as may be—but you have been chosen.

The angel pressed against the crystal sheet, though its form was still indistinct.

Only you can bring me through. Only one child of faith and blood is required.

In Zofiya’s heart belief burned, but Hatipai’s texts warned of creatures of ill intent that could lead even the most devout followers astray.

“Give me your name?” she whispered, though she trembled at her daring.

Those dark eyes, full of condemnation and strength, bored into hers, but Zofiya did not flinch.

I cannot—I am Hatipai’s angel and have none of my own. It whispered, laying its empty hand flat against the surface, a mirror of hers on the other side.

“What is your purpose?”

To kill the Young Pretender.

Zofiya's jaw tightened before she could voice a protest. Raed Syndar Rossin. He had saved her life at the fountain. Someone had shot at her, planning to end her existence in front of a crowd of people. He'd tackled her to the ground, taking the bullet for himself when her own bodyguard had failed to see the danger.

He'd been willing to sacrifice himself for the sister of his enemy. A mob had tried to kill Raed, and Kal had him imprisoned for his own safety. The Emperor had hoped to buy some time to decide what to do with the Pretender to his throne. Yet, Raed had escaped. Zofiya knew she still owed him.

His death is necessary.

The angel's face was now so close that Zofiya could begin to make out details. The skin was faintly blue and marked with lines that were Hatipai's secret sigils.

He will bring geists, and they will dance on the cinders of your world. The smooth dark eyes never flinched from hers.

Yet, the Grand Duchess was not so far lost in awe that she did not consider the possibility this was an agent of evil. So she leaned forward. "Forgive me, bright angel. But speak the words on the inner temple of Hatipai—the secrets only the acolytes of her divinity know."

For a moment, the angel glared at her with so much wrath boiling behind its eyes that even the fearless sister of the Emperor trembled. Then it tilted its head, a sliver of a smile on its full lips.

Truly, you are a wise creature, Zofiya of the Empire. Her heart remembered to beat again. And then the angel whispered to her, the words that had been passed down in great secrecy to the Grand Duchess by the most holy sisters of Hatipai. These incantations were the heart of the goddess.

As the angel's words reached her ear, Zofiya began to smile. When they were done the angel looked down her with an almost maternal pleasure. *Now, child, let me out to begin the goddess' work.*

The Grand Duchess leaned forward again, placing her lips against the cool slab of mysterious stone. Her warmth travelled into the stone, and a sound like a distant bell rolled from the earth.

The wall shook once and then crumpled like a theatrical curtain being dropped. Zofiya looked up to see the angel step delicately over the rubble. The wings of light trailed behind, and the shifting face beneath reminded her of her long dead mother—though it was hard to sure under the veils of light and mist.

“You have done your world proud, Zofiya child of Kings.” The sound of her voice, here in the real world, was sharper—like bright knives in the Grand Duchess' ears. A cold hand touched her shoulder—it burned. “I will hunt the scourge of your world. The Rossin will die.”

Then the angel wrapped her wings about herself, dissolved into light, and blew from the room. Zofiya was left kneeling on the floor, sobbing frantically with joy.