

# Winged Victory

by Sarah Prineas

One midnight, all of the bells of the city began to chime at the same moment.

On the first strike, the air shivered; on the fifth the night cracked and shattered like broken glass; on the tenth the streets rolled, their cobblestones jumping about like fleas. After the twelfth strike, a thunderous wave that shook the city from the top of the Great Leader's column in Military Square to the depths of the filthiest sewer, all fell silent.

The city waited, expectantly, for the result of this portent. But nothing happened. Stillness again ruled the night, and after some exclamations, some frantic rushing about to no effect, the people went back murmuring to their beds and slept until morning.

Except for me. I was a very old man, and as everyone knows very old men need very little sleep. So I was awake when Winged Victory came tapping at my window.

At one end of Military Square stands a huge tower containing a clock and bells that can be heard all the way to the foothills of the Domain Peaks, if the wind is right. At the other end of the square is a marble column equal to the tower in height. Atop the column, a huge statue of the Great Leader is being crowned with a diadem of flame by a statue of Winged Victory. From the ground, she seems to hover over the Great Leader's head; the steel rods propping her there cannot be seen from so far below. I always enjoyed the contradiction: she's made of stone, yet she seems to float.

There I lay in my bed, as full of wonder about the bells as anyone else in the city, when Winged Victory tapped on the window: tap, tap, tap. I pushed back the blankets, crossed to the tall window, and opened it. She climbed in, bringing with her the chill of the winter night.

Despite her great weight, her feet hardly made a noise as she stepped onto the floor. She moved smoothly, but with the faintest of grinding noises, the sound of one oiled stone moving over another. As she stood, her stone wingtips brushed the ceiling. She nodded a greeting, then sat on the bed and crossed one leg over the other, smoothing the stone folds of her drapery over her massive thighs.

It occurred to me that if she could come alive, then the statue of the Great Leader might come alive as well, and climb down from his pedestal. Then there would be two of me! Though one would be of stone, of course.

She spoke. "The bells woke me." Her voice was surprisingly light, like a flute. The first time I'd met her, I had expected something more...gravelly.

I nodded, awaiting her pronouncement, for she always had a reason to visit me.

"There is a spy in your household," she said. "Beware."

I laughed. Of course there were spies! I'd had my spymaster, Vostare, put spies everywhere--how else would I keep track of what was going on?

She shook her head ponderously. "I must clarify. There is an unknown spy in your household. He or she is reporting to your enemies and wishes to overthrow you."

"Can you tell me more, Lady?" I asked. "Who is the spy?"

She shook her head, her broad face as expressionless as always. The bed groaned as she shifted her weight. "It is someone you love and trust."

Again I laughed. I was the ruler of a mighty empire. I didn't love or trust anyone.

Winged Victory stood. "Beware," she repeated. She strode to the window and flung it wide. Gracefully, she climbed onto the low sill, leaned out, and launched herself into the night air with a sweep of her great wings. Back she would go to settle upon the steel rods atop the Great Leader's column in Military Square.

Her coming had brought the chill of old stone into the room. I shivered, closed the window, and climbed back under my blankets.

In the morning, Dove, my valet, whom I called Valet, drew back the curtains from the bed, turned up the gaslights, and placed a steaming cup of black coffee on the bedside table.

"Good morning, Great Leader," he obsequied, as usual.

I ignored him, which was also as usual. Dove was almost as old as I, and was with me at the Siege of Verlannes.

"I suppose you heard the clocks last night," he said.

I merely looked at him and drank my coffee.

"Everyone will be talking about it today," he went on. "The servants' hall was abuzz for hours. Most agree that it was a portent, but I think an amazing coincidence is more likely." He shook out the extra blankets from the bed and folded them neatly. It was typical of prosaic Dove to dismiss the obviously supernatural as a coincidence.

Dove stood before me, awaiting my orders.

"The brown robe today, Valet."

He cocked his head and squinted at me. "That one makes you look like a monk, my Lord. I recommend the red velvet."

I growled. "The brown." He shook his head disapprovingly and fetched the robe from the clothes press in the next room. With deft fingers, he helped me dress, hanging the golden chain of the Great Leader over my shoulders. It was heavy. I took a deep breath.

"Get the secretary, what's-his-name," I ordered. "I'll be in my office." Dove bowed and scurried from the room.

I left the bedroom, my bodyguards falling into place two steps behind me. I called them Guard One and Guard Two, and even though they had trailed me through these corridors for more than fifteen years, neither one had summoned up the courage to ask the Great Leader to call him by his proper name.

Silently, we walked through the stone hallways of the palace. The whole, massive, deadweight building was of stone and as cold as a tomb in winter despite the braziers in every corner and the heavy tapestries on the walls.

When I arrived at my own office, I shed the guards at the door and went in. I was surprised to see my secretary. The city's clocks had not yet struck six; the winter sky outside was still dark. Yet there he sat, bent over his desk in the corner, elbow deep in papers, his dark head resting on one hand as he wrote with the other. He looked up as I came in and stood, bowing.

"Good morning, Great Leader," he said, predictably.

I ignored him, took off the Great Leader's golden chain, and dumped it on the desk.

The Great Leader's office was a big, high-ceilinged room, ornately decorated. The only ungilded thing in the place was my broadsword, the notorious Dragonfang, which hung over a massive carved stone fireplace. Actually, the sword was only a copy. The real blade snapped off at the hilt and was lost during the last battle at Rocky Ford, during the Vekoi Wars.

My secretary's name was Arlen Chase. I called him Sprat. He was the merest egg, a bland, boring boy, scrawny and bespectacled. He had been married to my great-niece, Jeri, who died last year in childbirth. The babe died with her; I had them buried under a heavy marble slab in St. Ethelreda's.

I waved him back to his seat and sat down behind my desk. "Take a letter, Sprat."

He sighed, pulled out a fresh sheet of paper, and dipped his pen into the inkwell.

"To the Archbishopess," I began. "Don't forget to add all of her titles." I continued to dictate and noticed, after a few minutes, that his scratchings were not keeping pace with my words. I glanced over at his desk to find him gazing at me. A pearl of ink formed at the end of his pen and dropped--*splat!*--onto the paper.

"Did you get that last bit, Sprat?" I asked, knowing he hadn't.

He frowned.

I was surprised to see any expression at all cross his face, for usually he was as blank as a sheet of paper.

"Sir," he began, and rubbed an ink-stained hand through his untidy dark hair. "I've been working for you for seven years, since I was twenty-three. I'm thirty years old. I'm not a Sprat anymore."

What a surprise! The Egg talked back! Perhaps this was the great event the midnight bells had foretold. I laughed.

He flushed and picked up his pen. "I missed most of it, Great Leader," he said dully, looking down at his papers. "My apologies. Would you mind repeating it from the salutation?"

I did so, and he kept up with me. By the time we'd finished, the outer offices were beginning to stir as undersecretaries and assistants and file clerks and various sycophants necessary to the running of an empire began their day's work. Even from my inner sanctum, I could hear a difference in their comings and goings and hushed chatterings. Dove had been right: they were all talking about the midnight bells.

I glanced at Chase, who was preparing the day's orders and announcements for me to sign, and

the words of Winged Victory swirled around in my head and printed themselves out on the pages before me: *Someone you trust will betray you.* Who held more of my trust than Chase? Blank as he was, I found it difficult to gauge what he was thinking when he looked at me. Might he hate me enough to plot treason? Might his somber face be a mask hiding terrible ambition?

He looked up, caught me staring. "Yes, my Lord?" he asked politely.

"Did the bells wake you last night, Chase?"

He set down his pen. "No, sir."

I raised my eyebrows, disbelieving. No one could have slept through that racket.

"I mean, sir, that I wasn't asleep when they rang."

"Ah. You were working." I said.

He nodded.

I looked at him closely, realizing that lately he'd been looking more weary than usual. No doubt he'd been spending many nights among my papers.

He picked up his pen, thinking I was finished with him.

"What do you think it meant, Chase?" I asked.

He looked surprised. I seldom solicited his opinion on anything, not even the weather. "The bells?" he stalled.

I growled. "Of course the bells, idiot."

He flushed. "I don't know."

"Surely even you have an opinion."

"Yes, sir."

"Well then," I prompted.

He got up from his desk and moved to the hearth, where he stood looking at the sword hanging above the mantel.

"Go on," I prompted again.

He gnawed his lip. "I think it was a portent, sir."

"Of course it was a portent! What else would it be?"

He glanced nervously at me. "Sorry, sir."

I realized suddenly that his reticence was due to the fact that he did, indeed, have an opinion on the phenomenon and didn't want to share it for fear I wouldn't like it. "Go on, out with it, lad," I encouraged. "If I don't like it, I'll just have you executed."

Unexpectedly, he smiled; I was surprised his face didn't crack. I suppose he realized how few death warrants I'd signed in the last seven years. "All right." The smile faded from his face, leaving him

even more sober-looking than usual. "Sir, I think--no, I fear--that the portent is a warning of--" he paused, then continued in a rush, "--of your death, my Lord."

I sat back in surprise, staring at Chase, but he refused to meet my gaze.

I growled. "My death, boy? I may be old, but I'm healthier than you might expect."

"Yes, sir," he agreed. "Sorry, sir."

"To hell with the 'sorry sir,' and tell me what you mean!" I leaned across the desk; in a moment I'd be up throttling him for his reticence.

"Something strange is going on," he said, finally meeting my eyes. "I can't put my finger on it, sir, but something is not right. Papers go missing and turn up again where they shouldn't. I've heard rumors I know are not true. The bells have only made it worse." He removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes.

I went to the window and drew aside the heavy curtain. The office looked out over Military Square; I could see clearly the statue of the Great Leader, Winged Victory poised above his head. My secretary's words echoed hers: another plot was afoot to be rid of me. I wondered, though, if Arlen Chase were telling me all he knew.

We were interrupted by an undersecretary who knocked on the door to announce that my great-nephew, Lord Cherl, wished to see me. I put on the Great Leader's golden chain and sat down behind my desk.

As he entered the room, Lord Cherl bowed deeply, then straightened the lace that foamed at his neck. "May all the blessings of the day be yours, Uncle," he said, bowing again. Lord Cherl took after his mother, who had been a remarkably short and stout woman with curly hair the color of spun gold. In his brocade suit and lace, he looked like a plump footstool. He'd grown up with a streak of weakness, a penchant for whores and card games and fine brandy from overseas. Lately, though, he'd been very quiet. Rumor said that Lord Cherl had taken up more serious pursuits.

"And to you, Nephew," I responded. "Did you come just to wish me a good morning?"

He looked discomfited, as he often did in my presence. "Not quite, Uncle," he admitted. He twisted a ring on his finger, nervous. I knew what he wanted, but he'd have to ask for it. "As it happens, my Lord Uncle," he said at last, "I find myself a little short this quarter."

I forbore from making the obvious comment. In his corner, Chase grinned. Twice in one day, a record! I caught his eye, and he quickly looked back down at his work.

"How much do you need?" I asked.

He smiled nervously. "Three hundred would do me."

"Chase, write my great-nephew a draft on the treasury for four hundred Imperials."

As my secretary wrote out the order, Lord Cherl rose from his seat and went to stand beside the fireplace. Winged Victory's words echoed in my ears, but I dismissed them: my great-nephew would inherit after my death and didn't need to hasten that event because I kept him well supplied with everything he needed. I got rid of him as soon as I could and went back to work.

I stayed in the office until very late. After hearing the midnight bells ring--properly this time--I

prepared to leave.

"I am going to bed," I said, setting aside the tax roll from the Chermin province.

Chase stood and bowed politely. "Good night, Great Leader."

"Are you going to stay here all night?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I just need to look through a few more files, sir."

"Trying to track down the missing reports and false rumors?"

"Yes, sir."

"Report to me if you find anything."

He looked surprised. "Of course, sir."

I picked up my bodyguards at the door and went off to bed.

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The next morning, another portent struck. At the stroke of nine, all of the birds in the city fell dead. They dropped from the sky, from their perches on the ledges of buildings. Dead swans and ducks bobbed in the river like fluffy boats. Thousands of dead sparrows dotted the lawns in the public parks. The statue of the Great Leader in Military Square was surrounded by a nimbus of dead pigeons, all feathers and plump, breathless breasts.

As I entered the bureaucratic wing of the Great Leader's palace, the air was thick with speculation and wonder. I ignored the questions and frightened looks and went straight into my office. Arlen Chase was there, looking weary and ruffled. "Anything?" I asked. He shook his head.

Before I could continue, we were interrupted by my spymaster, Vostare, who swept into the room like a chill wind. As always, she was elegantly dressed, wearing a sleek, silvery gown that made her look even more like a shark than usual.

She bowed gracefully and waited until I had sat down behind my desk before seating herself. "I presume you have heard about the second portent, Great Leader," she began.

I nodded. "Are we keeping count now, Spymaster?"

She smiled, her teeth as white as bones. "We are, my Lord." She folded long-fingered hands in her lap. "I'll give my report now, my Lord."

I narrowed my eyes; something was up. Usually, she handed in written reports like everyone else. "Go on," I ordered.

She gestured sharply toward the desk in the corner. "The secretary must leave."

Arlen Chase's head jerked up in surprise. "Do you wish to have no record of this meeting, Lady Vostare?"

She didn't look at him, but at me, her eyes cold. "I don't want you at this meeting, Chase," she answered.

Chase looked at me for guidance. I nodded toward the door; he bowed and left without another word.

"Good," Vostare pronounced as the door closed behind him.

"It had better be," I growled. "What's going on, Spymaster."

She told me.

After she left, I called Arlen Chase back into the room. He seemed nervous, as well he should, I thought.

"Sit down," I ordered, pointing to the chair before my desk. His face blank, he obeyed. He looked innocuous enough, I thought. His face did not proclaim him a villain.

He sat quietly, knowing well my trick of prolonging a silence in order to make a visitor nervous.

At last, I said, "The spymaster agrees with you that another conspiracy is afoot."

He nodded, and waited for the rest.

"She believes that you are the plotter."

He shot to his feet. Then he sat down again, collapsing into his chair like a pile of sticks. "Oh," was all he said.

"The spymaster is very good at her job."

"Yes, sir." He rubbed his knees with nervous hands.

"She says there is a rumor about that you are using your position as my secretary to consolidate power. That you wish to use your ties to me to make a bid to take the throne when I am dead."

"My ties to you, sir?" he asked, his voice low.

"Your marriage to my great-niece."

"Oh." I saw a flash of what might have been grief pass across his thin face. It had been only a year; I still grieved for her, too.

"What have you to say for yourself, boy?"

He looked up at me. Light from the chandelier over our heads reflected from his spectacles, making his eyes hard to read. "I deny it, sir."

"Of course." I sat back in my chair. Winged Victory whispered in my ear, and I could not ignore the memory of her voice. If Arlen Chase were the traitor, I would be wise to keep him under my eye. "All right, get back to work," I said at last.

"Yes, sir." Mechanically, he stood and went back to his desk in the corner, sat down, and began to write.

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A fountain stands in Military Square, halfway between the clock tower and the Great Leader's column, a three-tiered stone affair with jets of water shooting out in all directions and a broad pool below

that children play in during the summer months. It runs through the winter, thanks to heated pipes and, encrusted with ice, shines like shattered glass in the sunlight.

The next day, as the bells of the city were striking the noon hour, the water in this fountain turned to blood. I saw it happen myself, as I was standing at the window in my office, looking out over Military Square.

"Come here," I ordered.

Hearing the urgency in my voice, he scrambled from behind his desk and over to the window. We watched together as the fountain, like a decapitated torso, spurted gouts of blood toward the sky. Within moments, the pool below turned scarlet, and then darker, as the liquid congealed. The pipes became blocked, and the blood overflowed, slopping onto the cobblestones of the square.

From our vantage point, we watched as a crowd gathered to stare in fearful awe at the fountain. At last, a maintenance crew from the palace came hurrying out, pried up a block of stone next to the pool, and switched it off. The flow of blood oozed to a stop.

Beside me, Arlen Chase's face was paper-white.

"I think it's time to get to the bottom of this conspiracy, don't you agree, lad?" I said, half joking.

He turned a stricken gaze upon me. "Please be careful, sir."

I frowned. How sincere was that worry? It seemed sincere to me, but I hardly trusted myself.

After a brief supper of bread and cheese, which we took at our desks, we continued to work. I was reading a tedious census report from one of the outlying provinces when I noticed Chase had gone very quiet. Glancing over at his desk, I saw that he'd put his head down on his arms. Quietly, I stood and moved to see him better. He was deeply asleep, his spectacles askew, his pale face lined with weariness and worry.

I sighed, suddenly weary myself. Fifty years ago, my Empire had been a fractured and feuding group of city-states. I had used blood and bravery, sword and gunpowder to break them all down and then cement them together into a solid whole. But Great Leaders like me had become redundant. These days, the Empire needed to be ruled by an efficient administrator, a committee-maker. Someone honest, intelligent, and hardworking.

I placed my hand gently on his shoulder. He woke immediately.

"I fell asleep." He blinked and straightened his spectacles. "Sorry, sir."

"It's all right," I said. "It's time to stop work. You'd best go home."

He looked down distractedly at the papers strewn across his desk. "I should finish this up first, sir."

He always had one more thing to do, things that kept him away from his empty house. "Finish up, then. I'll see you in the morning."

It was very late; my bodyguards should have been waiting outside for me. But when I opened the door, they were not there. The outer office loomed dark and abandoned before me; the bureaucratic wing of the palace was deserted but for Chase and myself.



At that moment, the outer door swung open and Vostare swept in, followed by Lord Cherl and two burly men I didn't know--spies in her employ, I guessed. Without speaking, they advanced upon me; I was pushed back into the office. I sat down behind my desk. Chase left his corner to stand beside me.

"Great Leader," my spymaster began, "I bring with me papers that prove that your secretary is the traitor we seek."

At my side, Arlen gasped. "My Lord--" he began.

"Be quiet," I ordered, and he was silent. Slowly, I extended my hand. "Show me the proof, Spymaster."

She leaned across the desk and gave me a sheaf of papers. Each one was written in what looked like Chase's neat script, and each one condemned him: letters soliciting money from enemies both abroad and within the Empire, letters promising favors after he'd been crowned emperor. I read through them all, thinking furiously. The evidence seemed clear.

I looked up and met Vostare's eyes, and in their keenness I read the truth. I dropped the bundle of papers onto my desk.

Vostare watched me, a sharklike grin upon her face; her two men had moved to flank the fireplace; Lord Cherl stood near the door, fidgeting.

Arlen Chase remained standing beside me, face ashen. He was not a soldier or a strategist; he was only just beginning to realize what was happening. I had to get him out before they moved against me.

"Take a letter," I ordered, knowing he would obey.

He shot me a desperate look, but then went to his desk, seated himself, and picked up his pen. I noticed Vostare's men exchange a subtle signal. The spymaster held up a hand, and they stilled. "Are you ready, boy?" I asked.

My secretary nodded. Even from my desk, I could see his hands shaking; the letter would be illegible unless he pulled himself together.

"It is an order of execution." Chase's head jerked up and his eyes sought mine. I held his gaze; he read my purpose there and nodded. He took a deep breath and with a steadier hand began to write.

"The name, my Lord?" he asked.

"You know very well who it is."

His face unreadable, Chase added a few words to the document.

Vostare was smiling.

"You enjoy the irony, Spymaster," I asked, still playing along with her charade, "of having the traitor write out his own death warrant?"

"I enjoy irony more than you know, Great Leader." She glanced at the men by the fireplace, at the sword hanging over their heads.

I knew I did not have long. "Bring me the order of execution," I said.

He stood up from his desk and crossed the room to hand me the paper. I looked it over and nodded; he had understood my intentions. "Give me a pen." He gave me his own, and our hands touched for a moment. I wrote a few words, signed the paper, folded it, and gave it to him. *Good lad, I thought, now don't do anything foolish; just take the paper and get out of here.* He returned to his desk, head bowed.

I had done what I could for Arlen Chase; I prayed it would be enough to save him.

For me, it was already too late.

"That was very entertaining," Vostare said, still smiling her death's head smile. "But it only delays the inevitable. And now, let's get on with it." She turned to my great-nephew. "Listen, Lord Cherl. Suspecting treachery, I brought two men to the Great Leader's office to arrest Arlen Chase. I brought you, Lord Cherl, as a witness. But we arrived too late, for the secretary had already assassinated the Great Leader. Do you understand?" Marty nodded. Vostare gestured to her two spies. "Take him."

The two men reached up and pulled down my sword from over the fireplace. One of them held the blade out to Vostare, the other one circled the desk, reaching out to grab me.

I evaded him, moving farther away from Chase's corner. Lord Cherl, watching the scene avidly, stepped away from the door.

Without much effort, Vostare's men caught me, their big hands hard and rough. One took each arm, and they dragged me from behind the desk. Vostare advanced upon me, my own sword in her hand.

Abruptly, she offered the blade to my great-nephew. "Would you like to perform the act that will make you Emperor, Lord Cherl?" she asked.

My great-nephew twitched with surprise. "No, no thank you, Lady Vostare," he mumbled, pushing the sword away with pudgy hands. "Just get it over with."

The spymaster returned to her purpose. I looked past her to where my secretary, forgotten for the moment, was edging toward the door.

"Arlen, go now!" I shouted.

At the same moment, Vostare thrust with the sword. The blade entered my chest.

Chase shouted from the doorway and darted toward me. A heartbeat later I felt crashing pain and the warmth of blood spilling from the wound.

As I fell, gentle hands caught me, easing me down to the carpet. The same hands pressed something against the wound in my chest.

My last thought, as my body died, was irritation: *Don't touch me, Arlen, I thought, or you'll get my blood on your hands.*

My heart beat once more, then shuddered to a stop.

\* \* \*

I awoke facing the clock tower in Military Square. Far below me, the man who had been convicted of assassinating the Great Leader was being put to death. From this height, I could hear no

screaming, only the incessant whistling of the wind in my ears. After a time, it began to snow, and I watched the heavy flakes drift down, muffling the square in a white shroud. When he was dead, I was glad that I am made of stone and can feel nothing.

I am the Great Leader, forever striding forward into the future, youthful, strong, my arm outstretched, my sword pointing the way. From where I stand, I see the slate roofs of the city, and I hear the chiming of the bells as they ring in the hours. And over my head, as slow as the shifting of continents or the fall of an empire, beat the great stone wings of Victory.

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**About the Author:**

Sarah Prineas lives in Iowa with her husband and two children. She holds a Ph.D. in English Literature and spends her spare time writing and teaching a college level course on J.R.R. Tolkien. Her stories have appeared in such publications as *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, *Ideomancer*, *Paradox*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, and *Flytrap*. For more on Sarah, visit her [website](#).

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