



# Aetherwyn

ALI NUMMELA

**Aetherwyn**



PRINCIPALITY  
OF CHE

UNDELMAN

BRAL

THEARCHY OF  
SOLVYN

VAELORA

SEA of LANGIT

FALLVERS PATH

SUNSPIRE

SWIFTL

NULBARAK

WESTPEAK

AETHERWYN

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To my loved ones

For always believing in me



## Chapter One

“Torment! Stand against the halls tonight, for three dare to suggest the vile Strat’s welcome!” an exasperated voice bellowed through the streets. The commotion was emphasised by a blunt bell rung repeatedly.

It had been a long winter. The people were hungry for more than one thing. Hopes were high that the warming winds were well on their way despite all the trouble.

The criers were back on their wooden platforms, spewing hate wrapped haphazardly in alleged justice. It was nothing new, yet the atmosphere seemed tenser than usual: like a spark on the brink of igniting. Or perhaps it was all in his head; Ciro wondered if it was another case of him overreacting. Of expecting thick trunks to snap like twigs.

Displeased murmurs passed from one person in the gathering crowd to the next. Hoods came down as people pointed crooked fingers to the sky. People frowned at the clouds, thick and grey with another brewing storm. A view, a display of nature, not far off from representing that which was hated simply for its form. For how the Stratari existed, created from scratch through parts despised. As if wings meant they were above mortality. Never proposed but always assumed.

*Does anyone get to choose how they’re born?*

*Should we not focus on rations? On the coming harvest?*

*What right do we have to condemn an entire race for the act of a few? For the act of one?*

*Humans have murdered and stolen and committed all sorts of atrocities...if anything, it's in our blood...*

Ciro shook his head, hoping to think of something lighter. Neven stood beside him. Most of his weight was against one leg in a casual pose, but his expression was one of irritation.

Snow, which had clung stubbornly to rooftops and shaded eaves, had finally surrendered to steady, heavy rain, crisp sunshine or something in between. The white-blanketed township had softened into greys and browns, its frost-hardened edges blurring beneath the thaw.

Ships had set for open water, leaving the piers mostly barren. Thick fog would roll in during the night. Soon, the saltway fish would return from the waters of the Nulbarak region, the farthest south Aetherwyn went, and crop planting could get underway again in the early spring.

Ropes creaked, gulls wheeled overhead, and the land lay sodden but stirring.

Ciro thought that perhaps there would be work outside of print for Neven to pursue, something more physical in the open air, as he grumbled about the ink staining his hands and the dullness of the hours. He hated the press, the tedium of carving and setting type, the repetitive clunk of the levers. His restlessness was like a caged hawk, all tension and sharpness in too small a space. Soon he could take part in labour in the fields or the harbour, hauling nets or hammering sails. Work that Ciro would never be able to do.

The cobblestones underfoot were slick and irregular, polished by hooves and time, glossy from the rainwater.

Puddles occupied the low spots, dark with silt and straw, while the higher stones jutted like broken teeth. It was all too noticeably uneven. Ciro chewed his cheek in discomfort. He hated walking here. Not to dissuade the fact that he hated walking anywhere.

Suddenly, a short patchwork-vested woman bumped into Ciro. A small jerk up his leg made his jaw tighten.

“Whoa!” she blurted, dark eyes flashing upward, “Watch it!” Her skin was deep brown, rich as polished mahogany. She flashed him a rude hand signal before racing off.

“You ran into me,” Ciro groaned, but she was already turning a corner.

*Where is she in such a hurry to?*

*Dammit. Spirits be damned...this leg...*

“How polite...” Neven nudged Ciro, his elbow brushing briefly against his friend’s ribs, “By the way, no chance they get anything done.”

“Who knows, perhaps this time Sander will be awestruck by the crowd of three among his own, and he will show...mercy.” Ciro tried to keep his voice neutral, concerned about Neven’s volatility, and then leaned over slightly to adjust a strap on his leg brace, “Still, they should be focused on feeding the people...”

The leather was frustratingly slick with moisture, tempting his fingers to slip from their route. His back was already straining at the simple motion, the ache deep and dull.

*Seriously...*

*This fucking leg...*

With the brace, he’d been able to give up the crutch over time, but it was unlikely he’d progress any further. The medics had warned him against high expectations. He could

walk unevenly with moderate pain, sometimes stronger, and he was grateful for it. Or at least he tried to be. It was a miracle in a sense. The fall could have killed him. Should have. So, what was a bad knee in the face of death?

Somehow, everything.

He was furious. Enraged by his ligaments, muscles and bones for not properly mending themselves. Sick to the stomach. Always catching up. Always pushing against a wall that would never splinter: never give way and let him back into a room where things were normal. He was flawed. Broken. Or at least that's what stirred within.

He hated the way people looked at him on the occasions he was even noticed, when his limp was most pronounced. Just a heartbeat too long, a pity tucked behind their narrowed gazes or awkward smiles.

Suddenly, Neven laughed under his breath, but it was a tight, humourless sound, "Mercy for them. As if." His hand lingered, hovering near the thin dagger he kept tucked in his belt, a reflex he'd formed in the capital after seeing one too many pub fights. *Ciro* knew he hated to leave home without it. Not that he had any experience using it, besides dramatically stabbing trees and assuring *Ciro* he'd take out any *Stratari* with one hit.

Around them, the press of people grew thicker, men and women pulling their cloaks tighter against the damp, the air almost too packed with the smell of wet stone and smoke. Hems dragged unceremoniously through the puddles. Every breath passing through *Ciro's* throat tasted of ash and anxiety.

"Awestruck?" Neven muttered again, shaking his head. "Sander would sooner spit on the Hallowed Steps than listen to any talk of mercy for a *Strat*. Rightfully so."

Ciro gave a lopsided shrug, rubbing his hands against the sleeves of his patched coat. The thread was wearing thin near the cuffs. “Three out of thirteen. It’s more than before.”

Neven made a noise in his throat, somewhere between disgust and disbelief, “Three fools playing with fire.”

*Fire spreads fast.*

A newer, shriller clash of the bell split the air, so sudden and so loud that every head on the street snapped around. The crier at the corner, his voice raw and ragged from endless repetition, hurled words into the drizzle with a ferocity that bordered on panic: “Council speech! Dusk at the Hallowed Steps! All citizens called!”

Moments later, a pale, scruffy boy darted past Ciro, shoving a scrap of folded parchment into his hand before vanishing into the throng. Ciro glanced down and unfolded it. The words were smudged, but he could still make them out:

*WILL YOU LET WINGED DEMONS WALK  
AMONG US AGAIN? THE SPIRITS SEE YOU. THE  
SPIRITS JUDGE.*

The words were underlined in a feverish scrawl, ending in a blot where the ink had pooled.

Neven somehow caught sight of it and snorted.

“Demons,” he said, bitter, baring his teeth in a joyless smile, “They want us to forget what they are. They want us to forget the blood they cost. Make them larger than what they are...Simply bugs to be squashed.”

Ciro said nothing.

His fingers tightened around the parchment until it crumpled. He knew, of course, what had happened to Neven’s sister—how a Stratari outlaw had led Guards and a bulging mob in a mad chase through the narrow streets of

Ilenh. The Stratari's wings were wounded from the initial scuffle, so he was unable to take flight to escape. In the chaos of dozens, the young girl had been trampled underfoot.

It was horrific.

She was barely recognisable, but for the bows in her blood-matted hair. Twisted, crushed flesh, broken bones and bruises so large the true tone of her skin was forgotten. Ciro shook his head to get the gruesome image out of his mind. It was criminal. Still a source of anguish years later.

Everyone in the neighbourhood had grieved, but no one more than Neven. She was his last family. His only blood. Their parents long since passed.

Ciro couldn't overcome the fact that, technically, it was the enraged mob that had murdered her in the dark. While Neven's rage and pain turned dark eyes to the supposed instigator. A man who tried to fly away but could not.

Some scars never fade, even when the faces in the crowd move on. Even when the one deemed guilty had his wings torn off, and his body burned as a penance to the Holy Spirits. It would not turn back time. It would not bring her back.

Still, Ciro couldn't quite summon the same anger in his grief. He had never known a Stratari. He hadn't known the one they executed. Hadn't even heard a good reason for chasing him down, when it seemed he only sought to pass through town before a drunkard attacked him.

Was the violence not the chase? Instigated by the townsfolk...the humans themselves.

This was something Ciro could not say to Neven. It would not be reason; it would be betrayal.

To damn all Stratari based on the actions of one seemed irresponsible. Reckless. An abandonment of logic. But where was the place for logic in a brother's loss?

A woman in the crowd, older but not yet grey, caught a glimpse of *Ciro's* scrap. From what he could see, she held the same message. She gave him a disappointed look and dropped her parchment. It fluttered briefly in the air before landing on the stones. Did she disagree with it? Was she trying to change his mind in case he believed the words? He folded his hastily and shoved it inside his coat pocket.

In a way, it didn't matter that the words on it had sided with the majority. To many watchful eyes, it might as well have been a secret message about sparing Stratari lives. Or a mission to smuggle them onto the mainland. That was the risk of parchments racing through town. Unpredictable, uncensored words were dangerous ones.

The neighbourly surveillance of Sunspire was its most common, albeit biased, currency: eyes and ears could be anywhere, always ready to tangle in the business of others. *Ciro* had seen, in dark alleys and popular pubs, how a wrong word or a single gesture could become a story passed up to the authorities by nightfall.

Shrine-Guards would show up for even the most doubtful statements. They kept order within the city, so they had to be rapacious, especially while Sunspire's military strength moved to the border of Swiffler for winter training. Five thousand soldiers were a two-day march away. Still, in the unlikely case of an enemy incursion, there was a swift cavalry nearby able to answer the Council's call faster. But ultimately, the Guard was responsible for upholding the law. While the Stratari were viewed as an ongoing threat, their population was small and believed to be mostly confined to

the island of Vaelora. As such, a major military presence wasn't required in the capital at all times.

In the books *Ciro* read at the print-house, years after making it through practically every page and parchment in *Ilenh*, the *Stratari* were painted as monstrous or divine, depending on who was doing the writing and how long ago. Light, angelic wings. Dark, demonic wings. Cursed. Blessed. Insane murderers. Skilled healers.

Of course, all sanctioned texts in *Sunspire* sided with the notion of the devils of the sky, but a risky glance beneath the surface revealed the disagreements. *Ciro* had learned from the *Lady of the Hut* that history was a muddled mess of inconsistency. A pool of questions: pride and misery. He had been warned that banned texts were burned, and their owners fined or imprisoned. So, he did not own anything without approval. Still, his head spun in circles, recalling all he'd learned.

"Maybe they're not all the same," *Ciro* said carefully. "Maybe some just want to live..."

*Neven* whipped around to face him, his golden hair catching the faint light that managed to pierce the clouds overhead.

"Live?" he hissed, keeping his voice low but furious. "They live at the price of *ours*, *Ciro*. Every winged wretch is a spit in the face of the Sun and the Moon. If they had their way, the whole city would burn, and so would we."

For a long moment, they stood there. Staring at each other. The river of people flowing around them, trying to reach an understanding.

*Neven* sought company in his indignation, and *Ciro* was failing him. Failing a bond since childhood. Formed long before *Ciro* could even understand the stories, texts and

lectures that now fuelled his confusion. He felt somewhere inside that he should honour that and side with Neven. That there was no worthwhile nuance if he truly loved his friend. His hurt, enraged friend.

Neven, eyes trenchant as the edge of his dagger, watched Ciro for some sign of brotherhood, some echo of the long-ago brief summers in Ilenth when they'd shared everything: stolen fruit, rag-stitched stories, the ache of surviving without blood family but at least having each other. Now all Neven asked, in ways raw and half-formed, was for Ciro to join him in the comfort of supposedly righteous fury. Ciro saw it—saw the hope and the hunger and the pain of a boy who could not be gentle—and he knew that to deny Neven that kinship was to wound him further. Yet Ciro could not bring himself to hate as cleanly, as precisely as Neven did. He couldn't erase the questions that pulsed behind every story, every brutal, presumed certainty.

He tried again to summon the necessary anger.

He pictured Neven's sister, sweet-faced Lira, whose hair used to flash like corn silk in the sun, who once tried to bandage a stray cat with a torn blue ribbon because she couldn't stand to see anything hurt. He remembered, again, the day she'd been trampled. He remembered Neven's screams, high and thin, remembered holding him in the gutter while Lira's blood turned the grass crimson.

It was gruesome.

Awful.

Agonizing.

Ciro remembered, and he still could not hate with the seamlessness that Neven demanded, because the world was never as simple as Neven needed it to be. That he decided it was.

Ciro opened his mouth to reply, but stopped when he caught sight of something—*someone*—at the corner of the next street over. A tall figure stood still against the motion of the crowd. He was cloaked like most of the others, but his hood had fallen, and he was reaching for it. A mostly unassuming act, but just for a heartbeat, a glimpse of something white flashed beneath his garments. Light, reflective, and uniquely textured.

*Feathers?*

Ciro blinked.

When he looked again, the figure was gone, swallowed by the mass of angry citizens heading toward the Hallowed Steps.

*It can't have been...I'm imagining things...*

“Ciro?” Neven asked, suddenly worried, seeing the change in his expression.

“Nothing,” *Ciro* said quickly, shaking his head. “Thought I saw... Someone I knew. It’s nothing.”

Neven grunted and started forward again, shouldering through the masses. Still, he made sure to go at a pace *Ciro* could maintain. “I want to see Sander’s face when the crowd howls for blood. He’ll know right away the three won’t succeed.” He strode into the throng, every frown and jostle from the crowd feeding the conviction in his step.

*Ciro* remembered, in that instant, the first time he’d seen a swallow in flight, as a child.

The perfection of movement, the shocking freedom. He’d watched until his neck ached, and the sun burned the back of his ears, unable to believe anything so beautiful had the right to exist.

This was like that, but worse.

He’d seen feathers. A wing. Wings.

For generations, the Council of Thirteen has ruled in the name of the Sun and Moon, but when whispers of Stratari return, rebellion brews beneath the towers of Sunspire. Torn between friendship, memory, and forbidden wonder, **Ciro** must navigate a world where every choice carries risk. Mercy is heresy. Silence is survival. But what if the truth has wings?

