

AETHERSMITH

Twinborn Chronicles: Awakening



J. S. MORIN

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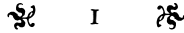
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PRICELESS

With naught but the faintest whisper of fabric, a shadow rendered in flesh crept down the moonlit corridor. The polished stone floors and vaulted ceilings that always made a chorus of echoes at the clop of leather-soled shoes lent no voice to soft slippers. Light from the nearly full moon poured in through the stained glass, turning red, gold, and green as each pane added its own hue to the otherwise colorless moonbeams, but the windows were high above, and cast their illumination only to one side of the hall—the other remained a haven for shadows.

The shadowy prowler crept among pedestals and glass cases that displayed various artifacts of Acardian history. There was a bust of Paillus Imarcos, the High Priest of Moloun who had originally commissioned the building as a cathedral to his god; a copy of the Writ of Establishment signed by General Tonald Duthford; a sword that dated back to the nomadic tribes that lived in the area some fourteen hundred years ago; and many other treasures whose value lay more in their history than their substance.

The prowler passed by these and many more. Curiosity was for the daylight hours, and lingering over valueless relics was

pastime for the idle and the scholarly. There were exceptions among the exhibits. Not every case contained bits of metal or scraps of writing that were mundane in every way save for their age. There were items of far more intrinsic value elsewhere in the vast halls.



Mulview tipped back in his familiar old chair, the wood creaking as he shifted position. His feet were up, crossed at the ankles on the worn oak desk that he shared with his cohort. His thick-fingered hands cradled a book, *The Fables of Fenmund*, as if it were made of fine crystal. Professor Darlingsworth had let him borrow it on condition it be treated gently, and Mulview had no wish to upset the curator. The book was filled with children's stories, but the old watchman pored over it as if it contained the lost mysteries of the Kheshi Empire. The book was fragile with age, its binding crackled as it was opened and pages past yellowing to the point where they were near to crumbling—but not quite so close that occasional handling was out of the question. Mulview was familiar with many of the stories, but not intimately. He would learn the tales as best he could, and recount them to eager little faces, too young to realize their grandfather was anything less than a master storyteller.

The room was quiet except for the turning of pages, the *snick* of knife on wood as his fellow watchman Danberry whittled away the hours, and the ticking of a clock. It was lit by just a pair of lanterns, one belonging to each of the night watchmen, who each used theirs to light their own hobby-work. There was a pleasant whiff of freshly cut wood in the room, but it fared badly against the odor caused by long hours of men idling about within.

As he finished “The Prince’s Dog,” Mulview spared a glance at the clock; it was very nearly eleven. He would not have time

to begin another story. He closed the book and set it carefully aside.

“What’s this one to be, then?” he asked Danberry, peering across the desk at the misshapen hunk of wood he was bothering with his knife.

“A boat,” Danberry said. “I got this bit o’ wood on the small coin—fella said it floats in water no matter what shape it is. I figure to make the hull solid so’s I don’t need to worry ’bout makin’ it too thin and pokin’ a hole.”

“Good idea. Smart friend ya got, Dan.”

“I ain’t said he was no friend, mind ya. Just a fella,” Danberry returned, just a bit defensively.

“What? You got some fella sellin’ shady driftwood or sumthin’?” Mulview asked, giving his friend a hard time of it.

“Naw, just don’t wantcha thinkin’ I gots friends what has connections or nothin’. Next thing I know, I gots every man o’ the watch dogging me for short-coin deals.”

Ding-ding!

A small clock, dangling from the wall by a single nail, stepped in to break up their discussion. It was a small, ugly thing, a cheap copy of the magnificent clock tower that rose majestically from the upper reaches of the very museum they guarded. There had been clocks before Cadmus Errol had built the tower, but the master tinker’s landmark touched off a frenzy of popularity of the devices, which had spawned a small industry of cheap clock-makers.

“That thing right?” Mulview asked.

“Ya, I think. Bromny said he set it jus’ this morn—by the bell,” Danberry replied.

Mulview nodded, having suspected as much, but secretly hoping he had a bit more time off his feet. With a grunt of effort, he set his feet back on the floor and hefted himself out of his chair.

“Ah well, another round to be made. See you in about an hour,” Mulview said and then sighed.

The two men took up their lanterns, and headed out into the museum, heading in opposite directions.



The prowler heard the footfalls echo across the massive central chamber of the museum, illuminated by the moonlight cascading down from the stained glass overhead. The soles of the watchman's boots made for a hard clacking sound that was easy to track back to its source, despite the acoustics of the former cathedral. The chamber was subdivided into aisles by silk ropes strung between short wooden posts. The watchman made his way deliberately up and down each of them.

The prowler worked out the pattern of the patrol, and used the displays themselves to shield against the watchman's sleepy gaze. It became a simple matter for the prowler to reach the true target for that night's work: the glass-enclosed cases that housed the royal family's heirlooms.

King Gorden was a humble man. It was a trait rare enough in common men, and rarer still among monarchs. But it was the age of the Progressive Reformation Movement, which Gorden supported. The king would lead, but the people chose their own destiny: elected parliaments, participatory governance, voluntary civic service. It was unseemly in such an age for the king to hoard such artifacts as his ancestors had accumulated over their centuries of rule. Thus for years, the king had commissioned scholars and artisans to clean and restore old jewels and artwork that had long moldered in palace cellars. When they were fit to display, they were sent to the museum so that the public might marvel at them during very reasonable public viewing hours.

That was fine for other folk, but for what the prowler had in mind, unreasonably late hours were the rule—and the fewer viewers, the better.

At the center of the rather large display of royal adornments

was the official raiment of the office of the king: scepter, doublet, crown, and cloak. All had been worn by King Gorden at his coronation and not since. The king dressed as well as any well-heeled nobleman, but no better, and certainly not with the gaudy tastelessness of the merchant guild leaders.

Surrounding the royal raiment were numerous displays of similar regalia from earlier in the kingdom's history. Rings, crowns, necklaces, brooches, swords both ceremonial and those wielded by warrior kings, scepters, diadems, chalices, and censers. A fortune could be made selling any one of them, but the risk was too great. The pieces were famous, distinctive, and beloved. The reward alone for their safe return would exceed the price one might find for them among disreputable connoisseurs.

Coin was power, so it was said, but an indirect and often unreliable sort. The prowler's eyes unfocused, and saw a different sort of power. There, in the currents of aether, was a small beacon among the drab, mundane bits of diamond and worked gold. *Magic!* Among the old relics was one wholly unlike the rest. A bit simpler in design if not material, it was a gold circlet set with rubies across the front—or so it appeared to most eyes. In the aether, it took on a blue-white glow, standing apart from the indistinct forms of the non-magical items and the general swirl of the wild aether that filled the rest of the chamber.

Turning, the prowler looked back across the museum and saw, highlighted in blue-white like the circlet, the Source of the night watchman. Man-shaped and leaking aether, that Source was the guard's life essence. All aether flowed from the Source, and all life depended upon the aether.

The watchman was wending his way to the main entrance on the back end of his rounds. Shaking away the trance-like state of aether-vision, the prowler returned to using normal sight. The circlet was boxed in a small glass case along with a handful of other jewels from its own era. Top, bottom, and all

four sides of the box were of expensive clear glass, girded at the joints with thin edges of gilded steel. A quick check confirmed that it simply sat upon the display pedestal, with no lock or clamp or catch to hold it in place, just its own weight.

The dark-clad prowler took the case in two gloved hands. With care and steady nerves, those hands slowly lifted the glass from the pedestal.

Clang!Clang!Clang!Clang!Clang!Clang!...

Blessed winds! the prowler swore mentally. *That crazy tinker must have rigged some sort of alarm for the museum when he was here to build the clock tower.*

It was too late for stealth, so the next logical step was distraction. The prowler took the glass case cover, and threw it as far as it was willing to fly, smashing to the floor with a crash loud enough to be heard clearly over the alarm bell. A quick glance revealed that there was a tiny, hidden catch that had been held down by the weight of the glass.

Eschewing the other finery, the prowler grabbed the magical circlet, and shoved it into a satchel. Light from a lantern was sweeping about the area, and the prowler dove for cover to avoid being spotted.



Drat! The alarm!

“Danberry! Rouse the city guards! Now!” Mulview shouted.

Taking in hand the truncheon that he kept hooked at his belt, the stocky watchman set a well-practiced scowl on his face, and stalked back into the exhibit hall he had *just* finished checking. There had been false alarms before, but with the alarm making such a racket, the watchmen could hardly be taken to task for rousing the city guards; the lads probably could hear it from their barracks anyway, just next door.

Mulview swept the aisles with his lantern, seeking a glimpse of the intruder. Ungainly though he was, he tried to make his

movements quick and unpredictable, to catch his quarry off guard.

“Aha, found you!” he cried.

The light from his lantern framed the prowler mid-scurry, showing a figure dressed head to foot in black cloth, with a hooded cloak of black pulled so low that there were slits to see through it.

“Whatever you’ve got there, thief, drop it and give yourself up.”

They were good words, and practiced often in the heads of guards who seldom saw any real excitement in the course of their duties. The mere presence of guards was supposed to deter thieves, so actual thefts were a rarity. Thus it was with great disappointment that Watchman Mulview found that his order went unheeded.

The prowler kept low, and ducked behind displays, crossing rope barriers, and violating the sanctity of exhibits of priceless artifacts. Mulview did all he could to keep himself between the prowler and the doorway, but it was a lost cause. The portly guard had come too far into the exhibit hall to confront the thief, and was not quick enough afoot to backtrack and cut off the path of escape.

“Danberry! He’s past me! This is no game; there’s a thief escaping!” Mulview yelled before lowering his voice to curse himself thoroughly for being a creaky old man, too slow to run down thieves from behind.

Things had always gone much better in his daydreams.



Clang!Clang!Clang!Clang!Clang!Clang!...

“C’mon, lads! You heard ’im!” Danberry shouted at the regiment of glassy-eyed city guardsman he had just let in through the museum’s main entrance.

The guards were unarmored, but wore short, heavily padded

jackets with the Golis city sigil on them. They carried drawn truncheons but, unlike the museum guards, had short swords belted at their hips as well. Two took up positions at the entrance to prevent exactly the sort of error Mulview had just made in the main exhibit hall, and the rest followed after Danberry to sweep the museum for the thief.



Clang!Clang!Clang!Cla—

Thank you, Merciful Tansba, the prowler prayed silently.

The alarm bell had either been shut off or had run down on its own accord. The sounds of booted feet—lots more than there ought to have been—were no longer drowned out by the blaring alarm.

Down one corridor then the next, the prowler stayed ahead of the encroaching boot-steps. Thoughts of escaping back out through the open-air courtyard were dashed when guards could be heard from that direction.

There are enough of them that they are splitting up and cutting off all the exits.

There was one exit, though, that they would not have thought of.



“We’ve got ’im now, eh?” Danberry said to the group of five guards who had stayed with him as others had split off to seal all routes of escape. “He’s heading up fer the clock stairs. Ain’t nothin’ up there ’cept fer clock bits and a fair view o’ the countryside.”

The thunder of the guards’ boots rolled onward and quickened apace as they spotted the black-clad thief entering the stairwell as Danberry had predicted.

“We got him panickin’, cuz he ain’t got no other way outta

here now,” Danberry said. “No rushin’ now. Stairs is a might tight, ya see. No point in breakin’ yer neck runnin’ now that he’s caught.”

Preceding Danberry up the clock-tower stairs, the guards filed up in a line. The stairs ran in a blocky spiral around the inside of the tower. It surrounded the great pendulum that hung down near to the ground, and as they got farther up, they saw a dizzying arrangement of gears, ratchets, cogs, belts, levers, and so forth. Light shone from above, both from the moonlight that entered through the clock face and from the oil lamps that lit the clock from the inside. Pipes ran up the inside walls of the tower, drawing kerosene from ground-level reservoirs. No one had to climb up the tower to keep the lamps lit; the upper reaches of the tower were seldom visited, least of all by the guardsmen.

Men were gasping for breath by the time they reached the landing at the top of the tower. The last few steps were tentative ones, due to both fatigue and the expectation of finding a cornered thief prepared to have one last go at defending his freedom.

“Huh?” Danberry wondered aloud. “Where’d he go?”

There were clockworks all about, but no proper hiding place. As guardsmen filled the landing all about him, Danberry looked up to see if the thief had climbed atop the uppermost gears, but there was no one there. Finally, he noticed that a small access door, used for cleaning the clock face from the outside, was unlatched. He pushed it open and stuck his head out, fighting back a wave of queasiness as he looked at the dizzying drop to the cobblestones far below. There was no place for the thief to have dropped to the museum roof, for the clock face was to the far end of the building, facing away from the roofline. Looking up and down, there seemed to be no footholds or handholds worth noting.

“Well, unless that fella’s part bird, he’s splattered all over Lords’ Crossing. That’s my guess. Betcha you’d see the body if’n

it weren't for that blown lamp," Danberry said, pointing down at the road for one of the guardsmen who had stuck his head out beside him.



In a rented room, several blocks from the museum, sat a huge bear of a man, with a shaggy black beard and an unkempt mop of greasy black hair that tried to hide the fact that he was balding at the top. A toothy yellow smile split his face as a satchel plopped down on the table in front of him.

"I heard the alarm from here. Anyone follow you?" the man asked.

"No, they're probably searching the ground outside the clock tower for my gory remains even as we speak."

The speaker was still dressed all in black, but now was unhooded. Jaw-length auburn hair framed a face smooth with the signs of youth. Her piercing green eyes met those of her associate directly, with no sign of deference or fear. She was tall, and thin of face and limb. The loose black outfit hid her modest curves and called into question her gender, but only when her face was hidden away as well; she was unmistakably beautiful.

Her associate reached into the satchel, and took out the circlet from within. He turned it over carefully in his hands. "I sort of expected something a bit fancier," he mused.

"Sure, Zell, let me just nick back into the museum and pick you out a nicer one. I figured you wanted a dressed-down magic crown that you could wear with your every-day rags. But I can take you down to Duke Street in the morning, and get you something that would go with a nice *fancy* crown," the prowler replied.

"Does it work?" the man asked, shrugging off her sarcasm out of old habit.

"Try it," she replied.

The man put the crown on. It looked ridiculous on his massive head, a thin ring of gold lost amid a tangle of sweat-glossed black hair.

“Whoa, is this what you always see?” the man asked as he slowly looked all about the room, especially lingering on the walls and floor. “I can see you quite clearly—and the two daggers you are hiding. I can even see Rakashi and Tanner in the next room, and the innkeeper downstairs.”

“Glad you like it. *Now* can we get back on our way to Scar Harbor?”

“Sure, Soria, first thing in the morning.”



Grab a copy of *Aethersmith*, book 2 of *Twinborn Chronicles: Awakening*, and continue your adventure now.

