

MAD TINKER'S DAUGHTER

Twinborn Chronicles: War of 3 Worlds



J. S. MORIN

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Magical Scrivener Press

22 Hawkstead Hollow Nashua, NH 03063 www.magicalscrivener.com

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Ordering Information: Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above.

J.S. Morin — First Edition

ISBN 978-1-939233-49-3

Printed in the United States of America

"Have a care who you choose as friends, Madlin. They are the ones who will come for you in times of need."

— CADMUS ERROL

"This is bad. They should've been back by now."

"Cap it, Hayfield, you've been saying that for half an hour," snapped a grease-slicked scamp. He leaned against a column of pipes crusted over with grime.

There was a click, and a *snock* sounded against the stone wall. A ball bearing bounced to the iron plated floor and rolled around, seeking the lowest point on the warped surface. Before it could fall through the drainage grate, a delicate hand scooped it up.

"Not good, Pick," Hayfield muttered. The gaunt giant of a man crouched with his back pressed against the door, his weight acting in place of a bolt. He dug a maimed, three-fingered hand into his pocket and drew out a pocketclock, which he flipped open, glanced at, and shook his head. "It ain't five minutes from Porter's Crossing to here."

A scrawny girl looked up from her work, but said nothing.

Cradled in her lap she held a curious rifle. It was wrapped all down the barrel in copper wire, and had a pipe collar clamped to the far end as a sight. A metallic cylinder hung just in front of the trigger guard, carved with strange symbols, and had wires running from it. The girl twisted a knob at the bottom of the cylinder and the symbols glowed a pale blue, barely visible in the light of the exposed bulb overhead. She dropped the ball bearing into a hole at the back of the barrel, and took aim at the far wall.

From her seat on the floor of the cramped maintenance closet, a woman in her middle years spoke up. "Buckets and No-Boots got Rascal with 'em. He'll get 'em through." She reached over and patted Hayfield on his good arm.

"Rascal's great at taking care of Rascal. The thunderail comes, Rascal's getting off the track," Pick said. He leaned his head back against the pipes and let out a long breath through clenched teeth.

"Shut your leaking valve, Pick," said the waif, not looking away from her aim.

There was a click, and the ball bearing struck the wall—*clang*—leaving a dent.

"Shut yours, Chipmunk, and quit with that toy of yours while you're at it," Pick shot back.

"Least I'm doing something besides worrying my hair grey," Chipmunk replied. She scooped up her ball bearing and stared Pick down as she reloaded her strange gun.

"I haven't got a single—"

"Shh!" the older woman hissed.

"You hear something, Tabby?" Hayfield asked.

"Shh!" Tabby repeated. They all stopped breathing a moment. "Yeah, someone's comin'."

Pick took up a bolt-action rifle that lay at his feet and checked the chamber. Hayfield pulled his revolver out from the inside of his coat. He closed his eyes, and his lips moved in silent prayer. Tabby reached into her blouse for a one-shot; it

wasn't much, but she wasn't one for gunfights. Chipmunk turned the dial at the bottom of her coil-wound rifle. It clicked at each increment, and with each click the symbols glowed brighter. When it could turn no farther, the runes were brighter than the spark bulb overhead. She wrapped her wool scarf around the gun so the brightness would not distract her from her aim.

They crouched and waited; the only sounds the tiny hum of the spark bulb and the approaching footsteps. Hayfield kept his maimed hand on the door latch. The closer the footsteps came, the clearer it became that there was a single pair of boots. The echoes in the access duct muddled sound; the steps were too light to be daruu, but whether they were human or kuduk was guesswork at best. Three sets would have been a comfort, since three companions were missing. There was no good news to be had from one.

The footsteps stopped right outside the door. Three heavy, thumping knocks echoed in the confines of the maintenance room.

"Open up, it's me!" a voice cried from the far side of the door. "Head-knockers got No-Boots and Buckets pinned down at the end of Trolleyhouse Tunnel."

Hayfield tore the door open. Rascal stood panting, his face grey with coal ash where sweat had not washed it away. He carried pistols in each hand.

"Come on, no time to lose," Hayfield shouted to the others. "Chipmunk, Tabby, clean up our gear and get it moved. Pick, you're with me."

"No chance I'm staying behind," Chipmunk replied. She tore the scarf from about the modified rifle and held it out. "This thing's just what we need."

"This isn't the time—"

"Right, no time to lose," Chipmunk cut in. "No-Boots and Buckets need us."

She pushed past Hayfield, twining the scarf back around her

rifle as she ran. It was pieced from stolen parts, sketched from blackboard theories, and assembled by an amateur. It ran on aether, which worked for reasons nobody could quite explain. She couldn't wait to try it.



Booted feet echoed as they pounded along the steel grating of the access tunnel walkway. They ran from one island of light to the next; the oil lamps that lit the way were insufficient to fight back the gloom. The tunnel walls and ceiling were cut from stone, obscured by a tangle of pipes: drainage, pressurized steam, condensation return, sewage, hot water, cold water, spark conduit. Chipmunk knew them all by sight: the subtle differences in insulation, diameter, and material told her all she needed to know. They were following a spark conduit line that ran from Central Dynamo to Trolleyhouse Tunnel and points beyond.

Rascal led the way, with Chipmunk and Pick close behind. Hayfield lagged, slowed by having to run bent at the waist to keep his head safe from pipe joints and the occasional overhead valve crank. Rascal came to a halt at a set of iron rungs set into the wall, spaced irregularly to avoid pipes.

By the time Hayfield arrived, puffing from the exertion of his awkward run, they had all concealed their appearances. Rascal and Pick had wrapped scarves around their faces and pulled their goggles low. Chipmunk had tied a kerchief over her auburn hair, pulled on her goggles, and wiped a gloved hand along one of the steam pipes to smear the grime that came off across her face.

But Hayfield took no precautions with his identity; he was too well known, too easily identified by his size and his maimed hand. He wore his beard kuduk fashion, the three-braid style he sported proclaiming him a military sergeant—or would have if

humans could hold such rank. Instead, they branded him a rebel, and a brash one at that.

"What we got up there?" Hayfield asked.

"Four knockers when I left 'em. Now, who knows?" Rascal replied with a shrug.

Hayfield stuffed his revolver in his belt and was first up the ladder. He ducked, and shouldered open the grate at the top, and Pick and Rascal followed him out.

Chipmunk waited.

She looked at the induction coil rifle in her trembling hands—the first of its kind. The tests in the maintenance room had been the first time it managed to fire a shot. With a steadying breath, Chipmunk followed up the ladder, using just one hand on the rungs. The other held tight to the invention that might doom her.



The Eversall Deep Judicial Enforcement officers had Trolleyhouse Tunnel cordoned off at the Goldfork Tunnel crossing. They only needed the one tunnel blockade, because Trolleyhouse was a dead end. All that lay beyond the crossing was a trolley depot, a newsstand, and a kuduk-run eatery called The Line End Public House.

The kuduk officers wore their thick, knee-length leather coats with too many buttons, and the bell-shaped helmets that everyone made fun of them for (when they were out of earshot). They were all about Pick's height of five and a half feet, and wide shouldered—the kuduks who went into enforcement tended toward the brawny side. The four who huddled behind an overturned pushcart had their leather-wrapped iron clubs in hand. Two more stood off, holding traffic at bay, but none of the bystanders seemed interested in interfering, or even getting close to the site of a standoff.

"Why's it so dark?" Pick whispered. He was huddled with

the others in the entryway of a cobbler's shop, looking down toward the dead end.

"Buckets shot out a couple spark lights," Rascal replied, his voice low.

"Of all flat-headed...he's gonna get nicked for spark damage too, now," Pick said.

"Cap it, Pick," Chipmunk said. "We're all hanged if we get pinched. No- Boots must have figured popping a few bulbs would make it harder for the knockers if more of them show up with scatterguns."

"Any clever plan, Rascal?" Hayfield asked, ignoring the squabbling.

"Even odds if those kids holed up in the pub catch on," Rascal said. "Just clubs for the knockers, and we're armed proper." Rascal gave a sidelong look at Chipmunk's rifle, but made no comment.

"What? We just rush 'em?" Pick asked.

"Chip's right, they'll show up with scatterguns before long," Rascal said. "No time for havin' tea with 'em."

Hayfield led the charge along the trolley tracks. The foot-worn stone of the tunnel scraped under their boots, alerting the head-knockers before the human rush reached them. The knocker in Hayfield's line of attack timed a swing of his club, but Hayfield took it on the arm and bowled the kuduk over. Few humans stood odds against the average kuduk in fisticuffs, let alone a head-knocker, but Hayfield had been a star sweeper in the crashball human leagues before he lost his fingers. The kuduk went down hard, and Hayfield followed up with several slugs to the jaw with the butt of his revolver. The square-cut beard, which the knocker wore at collarbone length, did nothing to soften the blows. Eventually the kuduk lost consciousness and his head lolled back.

The other head-knockers saw bared firearms and scattered for new cover, not keen on being caught in the line of fire

between the humans they were laying siege to in the public house and the rebels bent on rescuing them.

"Buckets, No-Boots, move your tails," Chipmunk shouted. She held her rifle at the ready and tried to look as if she had done that sort of thing regularly. Being out from cover was new to her though; she had always just been a lookout and sneak for the rebels.

The pub door opened and two crouching humans skulked out. One was carrying a strongbox in both hands, the shifting coins within jingling with each step. The other had a pistol in one hand and a sack improvised from a tablecloth in the other.

"Pox-addled dimwits, this is a rescue," Chipmunk called out when she saw them. "Drop that rubbish and *run*."

"No way, no how," the one with the strongbox replied. "Ain't givin' this up now, after all the trouble we been to gettin' it."

"No-Boots, what've you even got in there?" Chipmunk asked. Behind her, Pick and Rascal were keeping guns trained on the kuduks. Hayfield dragged the hand-cart around to serve as a bit of cover for their escape.

A rumbling felt in the feet alerted everyone. Any resident of Eversall Deep could tell the approach of a trolley by feel. By the hum in the stone, this one was coming in fast.

A hand-crank siren wailed from down Trolleyhouse Tunnel, and the trolley bell rang fit to wake statues. Farther down the tunnel, where no irreverent humans had shot at them, the spark bulbs shone brightly. The car was filled with knockers, and the barrels of scatterguns gleamed in the spark light.

"MOVE!" Hayfield shouted.

"Can't go back!" Rascal shouted in reply. "Head along Gold-fork and find your way low."

Chipmunk froze. She would have had to run back toward the onrushing trolley to make it to the intersection. She still had her induction coil rifle raised, and she sighted along it as she watched the trolley hurtling toward them like a thunderail.

She made a quick check that the dial on the aether dynamo was turned all the way up, and fired.

As Chipmunk was lifted from her feet by the recoil, she saw a red-streaked comet lance out at the trolley. She thought she had aimed for the brakeman, but hit one of the front wheels instead. The recoil threw her back. A moment later, she found herself staring up at the tunnel ceiling. The world wobbled in her vision, and she puzzled out that she had hit her head on the stone floor. She heard a crash and a tortured grating of steel on stone. There were screams as well, but they were the satisfying screams of terrified kuduks.

She felt herself being lifted, and could offer no resistance. Someone slung her over a shoulder. She muttered something, but it came short of being actual words.

"It's all right, Chipmunk. I got you," Hayfield's familiar voice comforted her. She saw his back and his legs. She could see the stone ground they flew across as Hayfield ran. She noticed her own gloved hands, dangling limp from her arms.

"M'rifle," she slurred.

"Huh?" Hayfield said. "Just keep quiet, Chip, we'll get out of this."

"My...rifle," she said again.

"Gave its life for ours," Hayfield said. "Think it welded itself together. Had to kick it away from you, smoking."

Back to vellum on that one, I guess.



Chipmunk closed the door to her room and bolted it. By the time they had gotten safely away into the city's maintenance tunnels, she had been able to walk on her own again. They had split the food No-Boots had pilfered, and she set her share in the corner, bundled in her kerchief. The room was tiny; she would not have been able to sleep stretched out if she were much taller. It was deep in just one direction, but that direction

was dominated by the rooming house's boiler and a forest of pipes that was navigable with some effort by someone Chipmunk's size.

She filled a basin from a spigot she had installed in the hot water line, and tempered it with a bit from the cold line until it was short of scalding. A polished piece of brightsteel was bolted to one wall and served as a mirror. She looked herself over and found nothing visibly amiss: no cuts or scrapes on her face, and the little rings around her eyes where the goggles had left their mark were already fading. She took a cloth that hung over one of the ceiling pipes and began washing off her disguise of grime, wringing the filthy water out over the sewer grate in the middle of the floor. Each time she raised her right arm, it hurt.

Once she had scrubbed her face clean down to the freckles, she stripped out of her dirty clothes and took a look at her injured shoulder. There was a mark in the shape of the rifle stock pressed into it, already beginning to color with a bruise. She leaned against the cold water pipe, letting the chill soothe the pain. Of course, as one pain faded another reminded her of its presence. The back of her head throbbed. She needed sleep.

Chipmunk pushed herself away from the pipe with reluctance, feeling sensation return as her flesh warmed. She shivered. The plain dress she had worn prior to changing into her being-a-rebel gear that evening was still where she had discarded it, and she pulled it on over her head. There were a number of incriminating things strewn about the room; she gathered up her goggles, the clothes she had worn during the firefight, and the parcel of food.

Weaving her way among the pipes behind the boiler, she released a hidden catch, and opened a door to a second room. Once inside, she threw a switch and turned on an overhead spark light. She dumped all of her gear on a bench strewn with bits of wire, notes, and a miniature spark welder, and left the illicit food within as well.

When the door closed once more, Chipmunk was stored

safely away. Come morning, it would be time to be Rynn again, a respectable young freeman maid at the university. She spread a blanket over the floor and curled up to sleep.



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