

REBEL SKYFORCE

Twinborn Chronicles: War of 3 Worlds



J. S. MORIN

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"The second version of anything never looks quite like the first."

— TINKERS' PROVERB

The throaty whirr of the liftwing's engines drowned out every sound but the wind. From a sky speckled with clouds, it descended like a hawk. At the control stick, the airship's human pilot felt his stomach lurch as it tried to remain above. He felt light in his seat, held to the aerial contraption by harness alone as he steered into a dive. A quick glance confirmed that the other liftwing was mirroring his attack, wobbling as its pilot fought to keep a fixed position a few dozen paces to the right and behind.

The ground spread out below like a map enlivened and rendered in miniature. Rectangular patches of discolored land were entire farms. The river appeared no bigger than a trickle of wash-water flowing toward a drain. Even through scratched and smudge-blurred goggles, it was wondrous to see. The thunderail tracks were a pencil sketch, the locomotive and cars too small to be a child's toy. The plume of white smoke that trailed

behind was the only hint that the vehicle below was a real, working machine. As the liftwing descended, everything below appeared to grow by the second.

Rennon was one of the lucky few chosen to pilot the rebellion's stolen airships. He'd been a pilot for only a week, and it was his first live mission. He wondered what a little craft such as his could do to the behemoth, but he had his orders: *aim for the boiler.*

There is a common love among small boys for all things large and loud. The thunderail was the holy potentate of those admirable traits, and its disciples watched it in awe and cheered its arrivals and departures. The thought of attacking one was an affront worse than blasphemy. If doubt crept into Rennon's mind, it was shunted aside by a greater love that stays with boys into manhood: the love of destruction. It was not the wanton sort that defiled statues and painted slogans on store windows, but the sort that stared rapt at the dynamiting of a quarry wall, or watched scrap metal melt to slag in the smelters.

Rennon swooped in low, coming at the thunderail from the broadside. Whether the engineer and crew were aware of the danger, he couldn't tell—there was nothing to be done. Hemmed in by tracks and sluggish by comparison to the airships, the locomotive could do nothing but chug onward in the stoic hope that it could weather whatever was to come. Rennon lined up with the locomotive and reached for the gun lever.

The floorboard of the airship shook, numbing Rennon's feet. Out of view under the belly of the craft, a tri-barrel rotogun spun. Though the bullets flew too fast for him to see, he heard the staccato clanging as they riddled the locomotive. The airship approached at a startling speed, and the thunderail began to look the proper size at last. Rennon released the lever and pulled back the control stick just in time to avoid a collision. He burst through the cloud of smoke that trailed in the

steam engine's wake, coughing as penance for neglecting to hold his breath.

A glance over his shoulder threatened to lose Rennon his lunch. Delane's airship made its strafing run parallel to Rennon's, as the locomotive had kept on moving. Rennon hoped he was far enough out of the way; those tri-barrel rotoguns were frighteningly powerful. He heard another off-key symphony of bullet strikes from the second airship's pass, the boiler explosion its crescendo. Rennon winced and ducked his head inside the cockpit.

A second glance back revealed a blossom of dust and smoke where the boiler had blown, but the thunderail kept on moving despite missing half its locomotive. Delane's airship wobbled as it cleared the coal cars. It hit the ground awkwardly in a barely controlled crash.

"Delane!" Rennon's shout was devoured by the wind.

He banked hard right, then hard left, coming around in a loop to make a second run at the thunderail. The boiler was gone, but momentum carried it onward. There were mission priorities, and Rennon knew that if the thunderail passed too far beyond the crash site, there might be no help to spare for Delane.

Rennon guided the airship in even lower than his first pass, and kept the locomotive's husk in his line of fire. He pulled the gun lever, and a string of bullets ripped into the locomotive's wheels. Rennon held the lever until the flow of bullets stopped, then jerked back the control stick just as the locomotive crashed to the rails below him.

The thunderail skidded along with a shriek of grating steel. After a few hundred yards, it dug its front end into the dirt and derailed, dragging the coal cars and the first handful of passenger cars along with it. The thunderail stopped.

Rennon looked up. Amid the clouds he saw two giant vacu-dirge airships that had been trailing him along the thunderail tracks. They were descending.



“Put us down halfway between the crash site and the thunderail wreck,” Chipmunk ordered. The helmsman of the *Jennai* brought the ship about and turned the crank that let a trickle of air into the vacuum tank above them. The dirigible began to sink toward the earth.

The bridge of the *Jennai* was crowded with twinborn. They were her officers and agents. For weeks they had been rationing food and keeping the one-worlders from both sides working together in a semblance of harmony. For all their efforts at diplomacy, the full bellies promised by the raid would go farther in quelling the bickering and brawls that were growing commonplace on board.

Her father’s ship, the *Cloudsmith*, steered toward the vicinity of the locomotive. They spoke largely by megaphone of late, but Erefan had gone along with her plan for a thunderail robbery. It was the fourth that Chipmunk had taken part in, but the first time she had eschewed stealth entirely. It struck her just then how much her circumstances had changed since her days in Eversall Deep, not so long ago. She and her friends had been mosquitoes to the kuduk then; now she was an escaped lioness.

Chipmunk leaned on the airship’s railing, looking out the window. “Get me ten men,” she said to no one in particular. It was a habit she was developing, since anything she said in a commanding tone of voice got done. As they neared the ground she tried to assess the condition of the downed airship. One of the wings had taken the brunt of the impact with the ground. It certainly would not fly, but looked repairable.

Chipmunk took up her crutch and hobbled to the stairwell. None of the rebels moved to aid her—they had all been chewed out for that offense enough times to have given up trying. At the bottom on the stairs, she encountered the throng of

riflemen who would pour down the gangplanks as soon as they touched soil.

A few of the men acknowledged her, and she exchanged perfunctory well wishes. As she waited in the cramped quarters, she put a finger to the iron collar around her neck and poured aether into it without even noticing that she did so. It was among the habits that had crept up on her in the last few months. The one she most despised was her newfound shortness of temper. She couldn't place the reason for it, and like an engine that had a knock but still ran, she was forced to press on without fixing herself.

Thump.

The gentle jarring of the *Jennai's* touchdown made Chipmunk wince. Her swollen foot had been resting on the deck floor and even the light jostle sent a stabbing pain all the way up to her hip.

The side of the airship folded down and allowed the daylight in among the soldiers. They flocked toward it, rushing out to bask in the mild breeze with solid ground beneath their feet. Chipmunk let the crowd clear before she followed the ten men she'd chosen to accompany her to the crashed airship. The clamoring of so many humans had overwhelmed the sounds of the ship. As Chipmunk made her way down the gangplank, she could hear the air valves taking in air to keep the ship on ground as its ballast disembarked. It also let her hear the arrhythmic clapping of her crutch as she made her way down.



Erefan was the first person at the doors of the *Cloudsmith* when they hit the ground. He had his belt of tools at the ready and his mechanics lined up behind him, ready for plunder. It was a disconcerting thought, knowing that he was engaging in piracy of a sort, the kind of thing that his twin from Tellurak despised more than nearly any other crime.

This is different. This is war.

War was the ultimate excuse. It could justify practically anything. Many an old soldier would tell a tale so filled with mayhem and depravity that one would question the sort of monster that could even bear the retelling. Then the soldier would shrug, say “but it was war,” and throw a pint of ale down his gullet. As if that made it all fine and good.

I want more. I want better. That's why the pirates do it, isn't it?

When the door in front of him opened, Erefan had a clear view of the locomotive from a hundred paces away. He threw his self-pitying thoughts back in the box where he habitually kept them and set about to get work done.

The locomotive was in a piteous state. The boiler had ruptured and blown most of the cabin away with it. The twisted iron and steel inside was beyond the use of salvage, given that Erefan had no smelter to reclaim it. The floor and what little was left of the wall was spattered and smeared with blood. Two bodies were inside—coalmen, by their uniforms, kuduks, by their beards. There was no sign of the engineer.

Erefan oversaw soldiers from both vacu-dirges as they flushed the passengers from the cars and herded them into clusters. Rifle shots rang out, demonstrating the folly of the few kuduk passengers who tried to run. The humans on board were taken aside, freemen in one group, slaves in another.

“Have them point out their owners. Up to each of them if they want to stay slaves or come with us,” Erefan said. The thought that some might go back sickened him, but it was their right to choose their fate, and he would give them that freedom, even if they accepted no other. “The ones that come with us can decide what happens to their owners.” There were several more shots fired in the wake of that decision.

With the kuduks and humans sorted out (and no daruu aboard at all), Erefan oversaw the inspection of their haul. Cadmus—his twin from the other world—had grown accus-

tomed to it, but Erefan was still adjusting to the idea of having manpower at his disposal. He didn't have to open a single freight car himself. By the time he had finished his other duties, the cars had already been pried open and inventoried. Many of the men doing the inventorying were crude sorts—uneducated, uncouth, simple thinking—but they meant well. Reports on foodstuffs were both welcome and relatively accurate. Dry goods were catalogued in the most general of terms, and some of the goods were alien to the soldiers who had been plucked from Tellurak and brought to Korr in Erefan's service—he refused to admit that most of them considered his daughter to be in charge.

Erefan was in good spirits, and drew genuine amusement from the reports on the more technical cargoes. "Box o' twirly things" turned out to be a crate of piston springs. "Worst swill I ever done smelled" was over a hundred gallons of turpentine. "Bunch of green metal logs with things out the top" was how one of the men described a shipment of acetylene canisters, complete with the fittings and other paraphernalia required for welding. The last was the "worst moustache wax I ever tried," which was understandable considering the soldier was describing industrial lubricating grease commonly used for printing presses.

It was a strong haul. Other cars contained tools and replacement parts for various types of equipment. None of it was exactly what the airships needed, but there were things that could be adapted to serve, especially once he rigged up the welding equipment. Erefan prioritized what to take and what to leave behind. It hurt to have to leave good steel and parts for the kuduks to recover, but first and foremost, they needed all the food and potables that the thunderail had aboard.

As he swept through the dining car, he picked at platters that hadn't been upset in the derailment. He had enough sense to know which foods contained kuduk ingredients that his

stomach couldn't handle—saltpeter, carbon black, iron oxide and the like—and managed to quell his hunger.

In over a decade as a slave, he had never had to go hungry. It wasn't until he became a free man again that he had to worry about keeping fed.



“Get the pilot out of there,” Chipmunk ordered. She swallowed back a pang of guilt and hoped that it didn't show in her face. When she saw the crash, her first thought had been the recovery of the liftwing. It hadn't occurred to her that the pilot might have survived and needed attention. Fortunately for Delane, Chipmunk wasn't the only one doing the considering. Though she had been aboard the *Cloudsmith*, Sosha was running toward the crash site with her medical bag.

Chipmunk kept out of the way of the able-bodied men who extracted Delane from the wreck. She turned her attention to the condition of the liftwing itself. One of the propeller blades was half missing, and fabricating a replacement was iffy given their circumstances. There were irregular holes torn in the thin lightsteel outer covering of the craft, evidence that shrapnel from the boiler explosion had punctured it. She rested her crutch against the hull and grabbed the intact wing to swing herself underneath the wreck.

Please let it be intact.

The tri-barrel rotogun was a powder-and-cartridge device she had torn apart and rebuilt with the limited resources available on the *Jennai*. It was ugly and awkward, and she loved it all the more for being that way. It was hers. The one she found under the airship's belly was dinged and dislodged, but just whole enough that she knew she could repair it in time.

“How's it look?” Sosha's voice asked from behind her.

“Looks like I'll be able—”

“He's bleedin' bad and his legs both bent funny when we

pulled him out,” one of the mechanics answered. Chipmunk felt her face flush. She had forgotten about the pilot again the moment she started examining the ship.

Chipmunk slunk out from beneath the hull and retrieved her crutch. Her ribs hurt after the long trek from the *Jennai*, and her hand was tired from gripping the handle of the steel tubing she had fashioned for herself. She made a note to rebuild the crutch from lightsteel when she found enough of it.

“Get him clear of the wreck, then get moving hauling this back to the *Jennai*,” Chipmunk ordered. Giving orders helped clear away the guilt of forgetting the pilot’s plight. She had more to worry about than just one man.

“We’ll need a stretcher to get him back to the ship,” Sosha said, not bothering to look up. Chipmunk glanced at her work as Sosha field bandaged the gashes in the man’s legs and torso.

“Can’t we just carry him?” Chipmunk asked. She fished in her jacket and pulled out a pocketclock. “We haven’t got much time.”

“Not with his legs this bad.”

“We don’t have a stretcher.”

“You’re the tinker; tinker one up!” Sosha said. “And hurry up about it.”

There were few among the crews of either ship that could get away with addressing her like that, but she knew Sosha was right. She couldn’t let a small problem like a stretcher’s lack of existence stop her from delivering one.

“Tobson, Swails, run to the thunderail, grab up curtains or blankets from the sleeper car—whatever you can find that’s sturdy fabric and big enough to hold a grown man. Send another ten men over here, too—Eziel knows we have enough of *those* to spare. The rest of you, set that airship down. I need some of it.”

Chipmunk took a hammer to one of the wing struts and bashed at it until one end came loose, then worked it back and forth until the other end broke free. She hobbled around to the

far side and repeated it on the wing strut on that side as well. A group of soldiers from the thunderail looters arrived to help haul the airship away when she finished.

Tobson and Swails returned with a set of thick velvet drapes in hand, the brass rings from the curtain rod still jangling from the top end. It was better than Chipmunk had hoped. The two mechanics laid the curtain out flat on the turf.

“Good. Lay Delane on there. Line him up right there,” she pointed with the end of her crutch. Chipmunk lowered herself down on the side opposite the brass rings and drew a pocket knife. She slit the velvet at intervals, large enough for the strut to feed through.

“Wrap it up and thread the strut through the whole thing.”

She was glad she’d brought mechanics along instead of soldiers. Mechanics got how things worked without having to be beaten over the head. They knew how the stretcher would look in the end: like a trussed pig.

In the distance, she could see the cargo from the thunderail being ferried onto the *Jennai* and the *Cloudsmith*. The wrecked liftwing was already well on its way to the vacu-dirges by the time Delane was ready to be moved. There was little else for the rebels to do except get the wounded pilot and their general back aboard before they left. Chipmunk checked her pocket-clock again.

“Damn! They’ll have missed the thunderail at the next siding by now. Someone’s bound to have sent a cable about it. It’s just a matter of time before Ruttania’s air force gets here.”

Tobson muttered something to Sosha that Chipmunk couldn’t make out as she limped along on her crutch, trying to keep pace. Sosha traded places with the burly mechanic and took one end of the stretcher.

“Sorry ‘bout this, ma’am,” Tobson apologized on his way over to Chipmunk.

“Sorry about what?”

Tobson lowered a shoulder to Chipmunk’s midsection and

hoisted her over his shoulder in one fluid motion. He took the crutch from her with his free hand. “Ain’t got time to pretend you can walk, is all.”



Grab a copy of *Rebel Skyforce*, book 5 of the *Twinborn Chronicles*, and continue your adventure now.

