## TINKER'S JUSTICE

Twinborn Chronicles: Awakening



J. S. MORIN

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"Every time a dragon speaks your name, your life grows shorter by a day."

- GOBLIN PROVERB

adlin slipped the spectacles off her face and mopped away dripping sweat with a rag from her belt. The furnaces made the foundry an oven not just for metals, but for the workforce as well. All around her, goblins hustled this way and that, each at some small errand that was essential in the grand operation of what Madlin had begun to call the Valley of Coil Guns. Every square foot of space was dedicated to the sole production of the weapons for which she had become famous. Each day she toured all twenty-one buildings in the complex, culminating in watching the day's production quota packed into boxes and locked away in a warehouse. Technically that was the twenty-second building, but unlike the rest, Madlin was not allowed inside.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes shut to force away a headache. It had been a long day of inspecting reports written in notations she could barely comprehend, even after months of practice. The goblin metallurgists were meticulous in their record-keeping, but their handwriting was tiny. Madlin suspected after squinting at so many of them, she was going to need to grind a new refractory angle into her spectacles; the ones she had were just not quite up to the task.

The trill of the shift bell pierced Madlin's ears like a hail of bullets. Thankfully the sound ended after a few seconds, and the goblin workforce flowed to allow one set of workers to exit as the next shift arrived. Even with all the time she had spent among them, she could only pick a few goblins out of a crowd by sight. When she opened her eyes moments later, she could have imagined that the shift had never changed. Goblins manned every piece of equipment, same as they had before she closed them. While she still marveled at their efficiency, Madlin was no longer awed by the goblins.

Just a bunch of replaceable gears: quick to train, quick to replace, never do anything to surprise you.

A goblin chuckle drew Madlin's attention. A casual listener might mistake the sound for a stutter of the clearing of a throat, but Madlin had known the tinker long enough to recognize his nervous laugh. "Fr'n'ta'gur wants to see you," K'k'rt said.

The elderly goblin walked with the aid of a stick, too proud to make the daily trek down from the mountain city atop the head of a lizard. K'k'rt hunched over, shoulders heaving as he caught his breath. "Must be important if you ran all the way here," Madlin replied.

K'k'rt glowered at her. "I did not run. And it is always important when Fr'n'ta'gur wants to speak with someone."

Madlin stretched and twisted her neck to the side until it cracked. She was sore and bleary-eyed, sticky with sweat and empty of stomach. "I guess I could use one of those baths the priests insist on," she said with a sigh.

K'k'rt shook his head. "It's not that kind of visit. Last time

you had to wheedle the priests into granting you an audience. This time, *he* wants to see *you*. It's an important distinction. You're coming as you are, reeking and disheveled."

Madlin raised an eyebrow. "You notice that sort of thing?"

K'k'rt chuckled. "I'm amazed you do. You hardly even know the names of your assistants. Now come along; Fr'n'ta'gur won't like waiting."

"I thought you told me he barely notices the passing of time."

"That's when you're the one requesting the meeting."



When Madlin arrived in Fr'n'ta'gur's lair, the first thing that she noticed was that the dragon was not performing his usual theatrics, hiding in the dark recesses of the cavern upon her arrival. Instead, she found the cavern well lit by aether and the dragon waiting at the edge of the precipice that overlooked his sea of treasure. The second thing she noticed was the stack of crates—crates she recognized from the warehouse she was not allowed to enter.

"Greetings, Madlin Errol of Korr," Fr'n'ta'gur said, his voice vibrating through the floor and into the soles of Madlin's feet. The dragon grumbled something in the goblin tongue, and the priests that had escorted her to the lair departed in haste. "I have arranged privacy for us. There will be no ears listening to your replies, even if my own words rumble through the mountain. Nor will any goblin eyes peer in at us in secret."

"To what do I owe these considerations?" Madlin asked. "Does it have something to do with the guns you owe me?"

Fr'n'ta'gur bared his teeth in what Madlin had come to understand was the equivalent of a smile. "Indeed. These are yours. You may take them home with you tonight."

Madlin did quick math. "Those crates only hold eight coil guns apiece. There's only seventy-two in that whole stack."

"I imagine you must tire of life here among my worshipers," Fr'n'ta'gur said. "You stay among us because of the terms of our bargain, not because you are stranded. Tonight, you return home with these seventy-two weapons. Tomorrow, you arrive to resume your work. Each night, you may take another load of crates, until you have your full share."

"I ... well ..."

"Do you find this acceptable?" Fr'n'ta'gur asked.

I find it damned suspicious, you ship-sized lizard. When did you grow a generous streak? "Yes, thank you," Madlin replied. Was he trying to get rid of her? Did he assume that she would take seventy-two of the guns and count her blessings that she escaped with her life? Perhaps. Did he plan to attack, maybe breathe fire through the open world-hole? Unlikely. What would he gain? Was he just curious? Best case, I suppose. Not much to bet on. There was little else to be done though. Refuse, and Fr'n'ta'gur would take offense—for form's sake, he would have to. Then again, with his promise of privacy, he could lie to his own priests and say anything he liked.

"You may also bring any personal effects you like," the dragon said. "I understand the furnishings and tools are not to your human standards."

Madlin forced a tight smile onto her face. Gut you, K'k'rt! Do you run to your dragon with my every gripe?

"I apologize if my worshipers have not the skill of your native craftsmen. Make yourself as comfortable here as you are able. I expect that it will be three seasons before your weapons are all delivered, assuming this paltry amount is not typical of the number made each day."

Every fiber of Madlin's being told her that it was a trick, a trap of some sort, a double-deal, or an outright lie. The problem was that without knowing which, she couldn't think of a way to refuse the dragon's offer. Without a counter in place, angering the dragon would end their deal and her life.

"It'll just take a moment," Madlin said. Rynn was already

readying the world-ripper for her retrieval. Madlin watched the dragon's eyes, eager to discern how keen the beast's vision was in the aether. Would it be able to track the viewframe's location as Rynn lined it up prior to opening a hole?

Fr'n'ta'gur settled back onto his haunches, withdrawing his bargesized head from her vicinity. The reptilian slits in the dragon's eyes widened. Dan had always gotten a distant look in his eyes when he peered into the aether; Sosha and Jamile as well, on the few occasions Madlin had seen one of them look. Madlin's assessment had counted on tracking the dragon's eyes, but at least she was fairly certain that he was watching for the viewframe.

The hole opened not a foot from the stacked crates, angled away from the dragon. A trio of *Jennai* crewmen stood waiting, and immediately began hauling crates through to the airship. Rynn had thrown a blanket over the controls of the world-ripper, preventing any possibility that the creature took note of the settings—whatever good that might have done it. A hooded cloak hid Rynn's face from the world-hole's view. Every precaution was paranoid, distrustful, and precisely what Madlin would have done in Rynn's place on such short notice.

Madlin stopped to bow just before she reached the worldhole. "Thank you again. I will return to the valley in the morning." Before Fr'n'ta'gur could snake his neck around and sneak a peek into Korr, Madlin hustled through and Rynn closed the hole.



"I don't like any of this," Cadmus said, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair.

While Madlin had initially hopped to Korr, the strategy planning session that followed shortly afterward was held in the lunar headquarters. Cadmus, Madlin, Jamile, Greuder, Rascal, and Davlin were all present. The latter two represented the Church of Eziel, which had become the recruiting and manpower end of the Human Rebellion—they had also impressed Cadmus with their craftiness, organizational ability, and experience in deception. They all sat around a planning table in a purpose-built room bored out of the lunar rock specifically for meetings that required secrecy.

"We got seventy-two Rynn-guns out of it," Davlin said, "and the promise of more. We get a bit bolt-footed and don't send her back; we got something out of the deal."

Madlin waved the notion away. "For the time I spent there, that's rat shit. He's trying to string us along like some back-alley root peddler. He's given us just enough to prove he won't stiff us entirely, and not enough that we consider cutting out losses and taking what we got."

"Ain't spottin' the trap the key to breakin' free of it?" Rascal asked. "I mean, anyone who *knows* they're getting' scammed ain't really getting' scammed. They go through with the deal; they get what's comin' to 'em."

"The dragon must underestimate us," Greuder said. The old baker looked around for nods of agreement and found them lacking. "If he doesn't know we're on to him, we have the advantage. We just need to decide how to exploit it."

Cadmus stood, his pent up energy no longer contained by a chair. "And that puts Madlin in the position of bait. No. No, we need to plan a raid on that warehouse. We grab what guns we can, we burn down their factories, kill as many workers as we can, and forget that whole world exists."

"You know, Anzik can probably hear us," Jamile pointed out. The young Megrenn sorcerer still lived within the lunar headquarters, though he was not a part of the rebellion. He kept to himself, and that allowed many of the inhabitants and visitors to forget his presence. Not to mention the fact that he had the magical prowess to hide himself from them, even when he was present.

Cadmus blew a frustrated breath. "His people can have their

share from the raid. It's the best deal any of us are likely to get. Veydrus was a fool's errand, and we'll wipe our hands of the place once we've made good."

"You say we'll raid them, like they wouldn't expect it," Madlin said. "Greuder thinks the dragon's underestimating us, but what if it's not? What if it's one step ahead of us? Or two? I know there are wards around the warehouse—"

"World-ripper will get us past those," Cadmus cut in.

"And I don't know what they do," Madlin continued. "They could be simple barriers we could bypass, or they could be explosive, or spark, or turn us all into pigs. It's gutted magic, and we don't know enough about it to even know what to be afraid of."

"We could ask Anzik," Jamile suggested.

Cadmus shook his head. "It would be the perfect time to alley-stab us. Misread the runes, get us all killed, and make off with all the coil guns for himself."

"Why would he—?" Jamile began.

"Because my father is paranoid, and we might need a bit of paranoia to keep us all alive," said Madlin. "But he's still wrong about a raid. We know Rynn can get me out of there faster than the dragon can react. It wanted to see through into Korr, but we outsmarted it—or at least outmaneuvered it. I say we play along; see how many coil guns we can get out of this before we turn it ugly."

"Eziel's blood, kid," Rascal said. "You want to go back under the nose of that thing? We're trying to keep you alive."

"Well, I'm trying to win a war," Madlin replied. "We need the manufacturing, especially now that we're getting reports that kuduks are showing up with coil guns. We're not the only game in the deep anymore. We can't keep up with kuduk factories, not without the goblins' help."

"Maybe it's time we found something better than coil guns," Cadmus said, his earlier anger fading into a tinker's pensive view of the world as a puzzle that can be solved if only one had the right machine.

"Well, until we do, I'm heading back there," Madlin replied. "And I'm going to take that dragon up on his offer of bringing my own stuff along. Be nice to sit on a chair made by someone who knows what it's like to have hips. Even the things they've made custom for me are always too narrow."

"As a baker, I apologize," said Greuder. "Girth is the curse we share and spread."

"Well, spread a little before I go back," Madlin replied. "Goblin food isn't the most filling."

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There was no proper day or night in the lunar base. Clocks might say what they will, but neither sun nor moon held sway in the rocky depths beneath the moon's surface. It was easier to maintain a goblin schedule, even with the intra-world shifts in daylight hours. The *Jennai* had been offset from the inhabitants of Fr'n'ta'gur's lair by some five hours, so Madlin had chosen to sleep where an early sunrise wouldn't spoil her slumber.

When Madlin stepped through the hole into the hold of the *Jennai*, all her requested furnishings were there waiting for her, along with enough warm bodies to carry everything through at once. Rynn gave a nod of greeting—which was more than either of them needed—and shut the world-hole.

"All right, everyone," Madlin said, taking charge of the workers who would be following her through into Korr. "This is a simple delivery. We get in; you place everything where I tell you. I stay; you leave. Don't interact with the goblins. Don't talk amongst yourselves. Don't make eye contact if you can avoid it. We don't want them learning anything about this world if we can help it."

Rynn turned dials, and the viewframe swooped in low over the valley, headed for one of the smallest structures in the complex. Madlin's house was built to her specifications, taller than a single-story goblin residence would need to be, and tucked away in a corner of the valley away from the flow of traffic that came and went at all hours. The insides were spare, just wooden walls, poured-stone floor, and three rooms. The main living area was a combination drafting room and hobby workshop, too small to make anything larger than handheld. Off to one side was a room with a goblin-made bed and a chest of clothes. The only other room was an indoor latrine, which Madlin had insisted on. It was an afterthought in the goblins' architectural plan, so it had a separate roof and a second batch of poured-stone, delineated by a seam where older and newer batches met.

"I want every scrap of furniture from that place dragged outside and dumped by the road," Madlin ordered. "Don't worry about the bedding or the goblin-made clothes in the chest, just get it all out."

The workers mumbled and nodded, eyes fixed on their targets. When the hole opened, they sprang into action. The goblin furnishings were the first things to go. The door was a tight fit for the bed and desk, but the flimsy goblin furniture flipped around easily in the hands of burly human workers, banging doorjambs and the ceiling, but doing only cosmetic damage to the house. Madlin's instructions had included nothing that said they were to be gentle with the goblin craftwork, and the workers weren't. She took satisfaction in hearing the crack of broken boards as the bed hit the ground—its days of teasing her with promises of more comfort than it could deliver were at an end. The same went for the chair with its contoured seat that tried to force her backside into a narrower shape than her body preferred. In their places came good, solid Telluraki craftsmanship, salvaged from the ruins of Tinker's Island and brought via the lunar headquarters for Madlin's use. Finally, maybe this place will start to feel like home, and not a low-rent inn.

In minutes, the world-hole closed, leaving Madlin alone in a valley of goblins, surrounded by familiar furnishings. She took a deep breath, savoring the familiar scents of Takalish wood polish and the bleach from laundered sheets. Settling into a chair from her own workshop, Madlin could imagine away the rough-cut timber walls and pretend she was on Tinker's Island.

The door opened. If goblins had any customs about knocking or announcing themselves before entering a home, they did not apply them to humans. "What happened here?" K'k'rt demanded. "All your things are outside and broken, and ..." The tinker stared into the room, realization dawning when he saw the change in décor.

"Your dragon suggested I bring some things back to make myself more comfortable," said Madlin. "This is what human comfort looks like."

K'k'rt wandered the little house, poking his head around to inspect Madlin's new things. He even looked into the bedroom. "I understood that you would be sleeping off-world from now on. Why the bed?"

"Why not the bed?" Madlin asked. "I might not go home every night. With a praise-to-Eziel bed here, I can get a proper night's sleep without retreating to my own world."

K'k'rt nodded slowly, still looking into the bedroom. "Good ... good thinking."

"What brought you here?" Madlin asked. "You the one they nominated to find out why I threw my furniture by the roadside?"

K'k'rt turned toward Madlin and blinked. Then he smiled at her and gave his familiar chuckle. "Not quite. I came by to see if you had come back at all. Fr'n'ta'gur wasn't sure whether you would."

Madlin snorted. "You're not going to buy me off with a few crates of my own guns. You're stuck with me until I've got what's mine."

"You know ... you and Fr'n'ta'gur have a lot in common in that respect."

"Comparing me to your god?" Madlin asked, raising an eyebrow. "Isn't that sacrilege?"

K'k'rt chuckled. "Even the dragons know they aren't gods. They just get most of us to pretend, and spend their days surrounded by the most gullible of goblins."

"The priests?"

K'k'rt nodded. "It keeps the hopeless ones out of the workshops and military, so it works out for everyone. So ... back to work?"

Madlin nodded and stood, gathering her tool belt and goggles. "Back to work." \*\*\*

That evening, Madlin found herself back in Fr'n'ta'gur's lair. This time, the dragon loomed over a stack of fourteen crates, an improvement over the previous day's delivery. Madlin's hopes rose. He's going to follow through. This is going to work out. Yesterday's cries of deceit and treachery seemed like so much fear mongering. Her father had been hammering his own delusions into everyone else's heads for so long that they were beginning to see conspiracies behind every door. The Human Rebellion's bargain with Fr'n'ta'gur made too much sense for both sides for either to risk the arrangement by betrayal. One day that might change, and Rynn would be ready to extract Madlin at a moment's notice—Rynn was at the controls of the Jennai's primary world-ripper at that very second—but for now, things would continue as they had been.

"Your gift for today," Fr'n'ta'gur grumbled. Madlin flinched anew each time she felt the dragon's voice pound through her. It was a sensation she could never acclimate to.

"I take it there are eighty-four guns in total?" Madlin asked.

"Indeed," Fr'n'ta'gur replied. "Summon your minions and carry them away."

Madlin nodded and walked to the stack of crated coil guns. Any second ...

The world-hole opened, and the workers spilled through in an instant. The dragon watched, but did not try to peek around to see through into Korr this time. Instead, he muttered something in a foreign tongue, neither Korrish nor goblin speech. Madlin felt a tingle all over her body and knew that the dragon had worked magic on her.

In a sudden panic, Madlin fled through the world-hole. Or at least, she tried. The hole became a solid pane of glass to her, too thick even for her body weight to shatter as she slammed against it. Spots swam before her eyes as Madlin staggered back. She reached up to check a wet sensation on her lips and found blood running from a broken nose.

"This time, she stays," said Fr'n'ta'gur, twisting around to look into the Jennai's hold.

Madlin pinched her nose shut to staunch the flow of blood, and watched the chaos through the world-hole. The crewmen had scattered as armed soldiers rushed in, coil guns at the ready. Rynn stood at the controls, one hand on the switch that would shut the world-hole, the other on the dial that would move the viewframe laterally in relations to the dragon's position.

"By all means, attack me!" Fr'n'ta'gur proclaimed. "But your Madlin Errol will die if you do. She is mine now, and she may not pass your gate. You will continue receiving your weapons as stated in our deal, but any other disturbance from this device of yours, and she will suffer. My worshipers will find ways where she will beg them to stop, but leave her still able to work at her inventions." The world-hole closed an instant later.

"Why?" Madlin asked, her voice nasal, her head swimming.

"Because you are going to make me far more than just the weapons you have shown me," Fr'n'ta'gur said. "You are going to create everything I tell you to." He finished by calling out in the goblin tongue, words that, for all her time in Veydrus, Madlin had yet to glean even the simplest meanings from.

A squad of goblins emerged from the hallway. Madlin tried to focus on them, but she could barely stand. She heard chains though. It was a sound she could never forget. The goblins surrounded her, crowding too close for her comfort. They pulled at her arms, sending shooting pains into her nose as she tried to hold it steady and shut. She tried to shake them off, but weaklings that they were, they outnumbered her. After a brief scuffle, they slipped something over her head, and she felt another tingle in the aether of magic working upon her, and then the far more concrete sensation of cold metal around her neck.

With blood dripping down her face, Madlin clutched at the collar, finding two eyelets with chains leading into goblin hands, but neither hinge nor clasp. It was Deliah all over again. She had been captured, collared. She pulled on one of the chains with both hands, yanking one of her goblin captors from his feet, but then a jolt of spark shook her body and she collapsed to the stone floor. Three more jolts followed, each sending a spasm through her every muscle. Fr'n'ta'gur spoke a brief command to the goblins, and the jolts stopped.

"They will take you to the healer, then to your new quarters," said Fr'n'ta'gur. "In time, you will learn that you have received a great honor. I do not trifle with forces like your allies lightly. You are very valuable."

The goblins holding the chains tugged Madlin to her feet. Thankfully, they did not object when she resumed quelling the flow of blood from her nose. Still reeling and unable to focus her thoughts, she allowed herself to be led from the dragon's lair and up into the passages to the surface.

The journey to the goblin healer was not a long one. Perhaps two blocks filled with gawking eyes were all it took to bring her to a tidy, whitewashed building that smelled of antiseptics. At least they seem to have some concept of medicine. She had not run into any goblin medical personnel in the valley during her stay, so she could only guess that they were more primitive

than Tellurak's physicians. Once her handlers ushered her inside, she was only mildly relieved.

The hospital room was centered on a knee-high table with a polished shine that told her that the wood was well-sealed. Shelves along one wall were filled with glass jars bearing illegible labels. Cabinets dominated another wall, and a third bore hooks holding tools of every description. Many of them had familiar appearances, similar in form to ones that Jamile had described from her medical training. Others, Madlin's imagination could only make macabre guesses as to their function. She could only hope that a simple broken nose wouldn't require any of them.

One of the goblins spoke up and conversed with the flummoxed physician, who was clearly unprepared to receive a human patient. Madlin was guided to a seat on the floor while the physician climbed onto the table to examine her. She allowed her hands to be pried free of her face, restarting the flow of blood. The physician chittered orders to an assistant, and in moments Madlin's face had been daubed clean with alcohol. Rolled bits of liniment-soaked cloth were stuffed up her nostrils, stemming the flow of blood. A pair of thin, metal bars flared to life with aether in the physician's hands. Madlin flinched away, but the handlers forced her forward and still once more. The physician pinched the bars to the sides of Madlin's nose, forcing it straight with a stabbing twinge; then they felt cold, far colder than bare metal should have. In seconds her nose began to numb, the sensation spreading across her cheekbones and up to her brow. A slathering of paste was then applied, holding the bars in place. The assistant packed cloth at both sides of her nose and wrapped a bandage around her head, packing everything tight.

The cold numbed the pain in her face, but brought her wits back to her. Madlin began taking stock of her new situation as the goblins brought her a wash bowl and soap, and helped her cleanse herself of blood. *I'm collared again*. She was still too shocked and disoriented for that to have finished sinking in.

For now, it was a fact, nothing more. The dragon wants me, which means he wants me alive. That's good. He might find ways to make my life miserable, but as long as I can survive, I can figure a way out of this. Eziel's blood, he even said he'd keep delivering coil guns. Madlin paused in her thoughts as the handlers prodded her to her feet. She followed them out of the hospital and back toward the mountain. Of course he'd promise to keep the deal. He needed to buy time, and to stop them thinking of ways to rescue me. As long as they keep getting the guns, he must assume they'll play things safe.

Madlin sighed. *He's probably right, too.* In a strange way, it was a relief. The expected treachery had come, albeit in a form none of them had predicted. And she was still alive.



Madlin's new quarters were within the dragon's complex. It was not a part of the lair itself, but rather a newly excavated chamber not far from where Fr'n'ta'gur's priests lived and worked. Life in Korr's deeps had taught her what new stonework looked like. It galled her to think that the goblins had been planning ahead for weeks for this betrayal. Almost as galling was the fact that by the time she had arrived back from the goblin hospital, all her belongings had already been set up within. From desk to dresser, everything from her cottage in the valley was set up just as she had left it. The sheets were even tucked, and the pillows fluffed.

Her captors had proven to be an enigma. Two goblins were assigned to the ends of her chains, which clasped around their wrists with hinged bracers. The goblins could remove these easily, but they also bore runes that would send one of those jolts of spark through her whenever they liked. Neither of them would admit to understanding the least bit of Korrish, but when she had pantomimed a desire to change out of her blood-stained clothes, they had been surprisingly accommodating. Both had removed their bracer, allowing Madlin to pull a fresh

shirt over her head by threading the chains through one at a time. Changing in front of the goblins was somehow less intimidating than being naked in front of a kuduk. Kuduks looked almost human, and she could project human motives onto them. The goblins ... well the ones that didn't speak Korrish were little more than trained monkeys to her.

It occurred to her to run when she had herself free from the handlers briefly. *Run where?* That was the problem. For the time being, she had no solution to the impassable world-ripper. Working with Anzik on a solution to that would be a priority for her. She was also in the dragon's lair, and would have to sneak past untold numbers of goblins just to reach the surface. That left a more old-fashioned escape a dubious prospect, not to mention that she would be dragging her chains the whole way.

The chains. Drat them for a sense of irony, but the goblins had used knowledge she had taught them to help free Korr's humans, and turned it to her capture. The chains were forged of brightsteel, and were frankly one of their metallurgists' better efforts.

I'm too tired to escape, anyway. The day's events had drained Madlin, both of willpower and of blood. Whatever plans she came up with, they could wait for a bit of convalescence first. Broken noses weren't the sort of thing that took months to heal. She collapsed onto the bed amid a clatter of delicate chain.

"K'k'rt," she muttered. Surprisingly, being unable to breathe through her nose made goblin names a bit easier to pronounce. She repeated herself, lifting her head to see if she got any response from her keepers. One of them shook his head.

"K'k'rt?" Madlin asked, trying the human method of raising the last syllable to make an inquiry. The other keeper nodded, but the first one muttered to him, and then both looked to her and shook their heads.

Madlin collapsed onto her back and looked up at the stone

ceiling. She was feeling queasy from having more of her own blood than food in her stomach, and exhausted from the turmoil. *Rynn's problem*, she decided, and gave in to sleep.



Grab a copy of *Tinker's Justice*, book 7 of the *Twinborn Chronicles*, and continue your adventure now.