

WORLD-RIPPER WAR

Twinborn Chronicles: Awakening



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“I’ve built so many things; I could never have picked a favorite. It turns out, that’s because it wasn’t a thing I created, but a place, that I cared about most.”

— CADMUS ERROL

Home had become just a word. At best it was a memory, but it had no meaning as a real place anymore. The Jennai was a place for war, for camaraderie, for planning. It was no fit place to settle and feel cozy and warm, loved, safe, and familiar. There was purpose, responsibility, and anger in plenty. There was also a strangeness but not brought about by the place, but by the change in population.

Rynn of Eversall was General of the Human Rebellion, commander of all forces aboard the Jennai or acting afield in the name of the rebels. But alongside her was Madlin Errol, her twin from Tellurak, not native to Korr but there nonetheless. They shared one another’s thoughts and memories as always, but there was no longer the distance of a world apart to separate awareness. She was just one among many such refugees from Tellurak and the now-deserted community of Tinker’s

Island They had come to Korr, twinborn and one-worlder alike, and now lived together in the everexpanding airship.

The skies were clear and bright, but a storm raged below them. Never before her time aboard the *Jennai* had it occurred to Rynn that when the storm clouds gathered their fury, a pleasant sun still shone above them. The oddest thing was hearing the thunder under a clear sky above. Lightning flashed among the clouds well behind them, the sort that never made it to the ground. Each time the thunder arrived less quickly than the last as the storm drifted away until the low rumbles were drowned out by the crash of flesh and metal on the *Jennai*'s central plaza.

The wide-flat stretch between the joined airships of the *Jennai* had become a tournament ground for the rowdier elements of the rebellion. Two crashball fields had been painted onto the steel plate floor, interwoven with the landing guide marks for the liftwings that used the plaza as an aerodrome. While the *Jennai* was at rest, fixed in a point in midair, six or more games would take place throughout the day. Spectators gathered along the sides of the plaza or looked out from the windows cut into the sides of the vacuum tanks that once kept the airships aloft. Now runes carved all over the vessel provided magical levitation to perform the same duty.

Rynn's suite overlooked both the plaza and the skies around them. She had moved up to the vacuum tanks of the front left ship—the original *Jennai*, named for her mother—and her quarters at the nose wrapped around left to right, with glassed windows giving her a panoramic view. Careful observation had shown her that even with the curtains open, glare prevented anyone seeing in from below. Keeping a distracted eye toward the crashball match, she unpacked her latest creation.

The manufacturing facilities on the *Jennai* were limited. Despite salvaging everything of value from Tinker's Island, there was simply not enough room to install it all. Until they had a

new landward base, most of it would remain in storage. But being a general gave her privilege and she took it. This was to be the fifth modification to her mechanical leg, each better suited to her than the last. Every iteration took a period of breaking in, of course, but after that, the designs grew sleeker, more compact, more responsive. The one problem that Rynn had yet to overcome was the persistent limp caused by the asymmetry of having one leg of flesh and one leg half mechanical.

This was her attempt to change that. Rynn removed her tinker's leg and set it aside in a rack by the bedside, joining its predecessors in obsolescence. With a damp cloth, she wiped away the sweat and grime that built up where the straps had covered her skin for days since the last time she'd removed it. Hobbling on one leg, she retrieved the latest model from its crate. This version had two legs. The left was like the prior models, an improvement here or there, but otherwise little different. The right was a hollowed shell, with reinforcements at each joint and similar arrangements of springs to cushion impacts and stabilize. Instead of making movements for a limb that was no longer there, it would amplify the leg she already had. Both legs were physically stronger than were her own, and now she had the means to balance the forces between left and right and stop lurching around the ship like—well, like a girl missing half a leg.

The whole arrangement slipped on with some difficulty. Rynn had grown accustomed to having one leg free to help orient and balance herself as she struggled to buckle on the lower bindings of the other. Instead, she had to fight with the tinker's legs moving as she twisted around to reach each buckle and clasp. She tried for several minutes before collapsing against the side of her bed to catch her breath.

"I can do this," she muttered. Much as she knew the truth of her statement, she questioned the cost. It might take her an hour to get everything into position, plus the possibility that

the awkward contortions required would foul her initial adjustments to the straps.

Her determination was short lived because, as always, her thoughts were not solely her own. Madlin knew of her consternation. Rynn could not have hidden it from her twin if she tried. Madlin had just excused herself from watching over Cadmus's shoulder as the Mad Tinker searched for a suitable hideaway for their new base of operations. The old tinker was being obstinate about the selection; nothing less than perfection was going to suit him. Madlin knew she was unlikely to miss much, and Rynn knew it as well as if she had been standing there. In the same way, Madlin knew Rynn was sitting on the floor of her quarters flopping around in a pair of unruly legs that wouldn't buckle on.

Rynn settled in to wait, aware of Madlin's progress from the hull on the far side of the plaza, through the crashball field during a break in the action, and into the hull where Rynn awaited. If nothing else, the mutual awareness made impatience more palatable.

When Madlin arrived, there was no knock. She simply entered. Both of them knew she was there, and why. No greeting passed between them. Talking was pointless when they were thinking each other's thoughts, seeing through one another's eyes. In such proximity, there were just two minds inside a single space.

Madlin helped Rynn onto the edge of the bed and took the legs in hand one at a time, like a cobbler or a blacksmith fitting a shoe. She tightened each strap and marked the holes with an awl. She felt when each was pulled tight enough to balance comfort with responsiveness. Rynn wiggled each joint as needed, and once she was secured above the knees, Madlin helped her to her feet to stand with the wall for support. Madlin finished with the rest of the buckles and even the belt that came up around Rynn's midsection to join the two tinker's

legs securely together. Rynn could have managed that last part herself, but Madlin was already there with tools in hand.

Had it been anyone else, even Sosha or Jamile, there would have been some sense of embarrassment. She was half-dressed, half-whole, exposing her weakness and deformity, her inability to so much as dress herself in the legs she had fashioned.

Rynn waited as Madlin installed the outer casings, protecting the inner mechanisms of both legs whether they were mechanical or living. When she finished, Rynn stood with arms outstretched to test her balance. It was hardly necessary. With practice of having done several modifications, she had grown accustomed to balancing on new legs and keeping the center of her mass still and steady. She eased herself into a crouch, testing the feel of her full leg against the half.

“Much better,” Madlin said, echoing Rynn’s thoughts.

“Stop that,” Rynn scolded, though she knew it wouldn’t dissuade Madlin in the least. She twisted around with her feet planted and fixed Madlin with a glare. “Don’t I have some work to do?”

Madlin smirked. “I don’t mind you snapping at me. It gets you out of my head for a few seconds.”

Rynn looked down and ran a hand along the new covering for her good leg. “Thanks.”

Madlin picked up a pair of baggy trousers. “Here, get yourself dressed.” She tossed the garment to Rynn. It flew erratically, too loose and floppy for aerodynamic flight. Rynn lunged for it and stumbled, her movement not yet intuitive.

At the first surge of panic—the kind that accompanied any trip, no matter how minor—Madlin shot out an arm to steady Rynn. “I’ll need practice before I walk around the ship.”

“Just stay away from the edges for a few days,” said Madlin.

“You won’t get rid of me that easy.”

There was no goodbye. They both knew that Madlin was departing, where she was heading, and why.



No man or woman, given five words to describe Cadmus Errol, would omit “brilliant”—or some derivative—among their count. Of those who knew him well, few would have failed to include “stubborn” or “obsessive.” For eighteen hours each day at the least, he sat at the controls of the worldripper machine. The chair that supported him had been purloined from the dining hall in the first-class section of the airship *Cloudsmith*, which was now the front right quadrant of the *Jennai*. The seat was cushioned velvet, upholstered in red. Over the long hours of his occupation, Cadmus had left the surface scuffed threadbare and imprinted with the contours of his backside. Anyone else chancing to find the seat in one of its infrequent moments of vacancy would find that it never quite felt right beneath them.

The fingers working the controls did so with no conscious thought. Cadmus’s eyes rarely strayed from the viewing frame to the numbers around the dials, and if they did, it was only to mark them down when he found something of note. The desire to move the view translated itself in some corner of the tinker’s brain—wherein some small mental machine had no doubt been constructed for that exact purpose—into the movements necessary to achieve that motion. The view sped over a barren plain, brown and scattered with rocky and dead scrub plants, traveling at speeds that nauseated most casual onlookers. But Cadmus had inured himself to the sensation of motion that came with staring through the lifelike window to other parts of the world. Or to other worlds. For now, the Mad Tinker was scouring Korr for suitable bases of operation, but he would look to Tellurak and Veydrus as well. A single-world solution put less strain on the dynamo that ran the world-ripper, making for more reliable transport and easier rescues should the need arise. There was always greater risk crossing worlds.

Cadmus paused the view and stretched, cracking his neck and flexing fingers held too long in the shape of a dial. Risk.

Everything was a balance of risk and reward now. Every decision could be the one misstep that doomed the rebellion, just as one misstep had cost Erefan his life, leaving Cadmus without a twin. It was a game they were playing, but a deadly one. The location of their new headquarters had to be someplace where no one would look for them.

“Taking a break?” Madlin asked, sneaking up behind Cadmus midstretch. He shot a glare over his shoulder mid yawn. “Desolate pile of nothing, huh?”

“Eastern Lumberlands,” Cadmus explained. “Off the trade-ways from the western logging camps, picked over and abandoned.”

“And nothing remotely like a place to build a workshop.”

Cadmus grunted and started the viewer moving again. Madlin stood for a while, watching.

“I’ve had an idea, you know.”

“What’s that?” Cadmus asked.

“May I?” Madlin slid in beside him at the controls, crouching next to his seat.

Cadmus relinquished the controls with some hesitation. It was just Madlin, but he trusted so few others to touch the machine that a protectiveness came over him whenever someone tried. Madlin reached past him but adjusted only the angle of the view, not its location. In the evening sky of the Lumberlands, both sun and moon shared the sky in equal measure, neither at their brightest. She centered the moon in the view frame.

“Am I crazy?” she asked.

Cadmus furrowed his brow. “Probably. But what are you suggesting?”

“Who’d think to look for us there?”

“The moon? Do you have any idea how far away that little ball of rock is?”

Madlin nodded. “A lot closer than Tellurak.”

“It’s not as simple as that. The machine works on relative

location. The moon is constantly moving. It would be a nightmare to keep steady enough to transport goods. Not only that, it's just a barren rock. It would be haloed in blue if it had air around it. There's no water, no animals; nothing can live there."

"I've got this all worked out...mostly," said Madlin. She took a pencil and a sheet of paper from the console—Cadmus always kept a supply close at hand—and began to sketch. "I've had plenty of time to think lately, and I've knocked this idea around in my head enough that it's got bruises. The moon moves, but astronomers know *exactly* how. They can predict its location years ahead of time. We can convert that to equations and from there to a mechanism to adjust the net location of the dials—build that right into the guts of the world-ripper."

"I suppose ..." Cadmus allowed. Madlin took the lack of resistance as permission to plow ahead.

"There's probably no caverns since there was never flowing water to carve them. Instead, we steal an auger, a big mining one that barely fits through a world hole. We carve out a warren from this side, just sticking it through the hole and extracting the rock. We're over sea, so we just dump the rock overboard. Air's going to get sucked in from Korr but not enough to breathe."

"A minor problem," Cadmus muttered sarcastically.

"We've got three world-rippers in pieces, just waiting to install once you get off your arse and pick a spot for them. I plan to use all three. Two of them will stay open on a semi-permanent basis, on opposite ends of a canal we'll create, targeted a few inches apart and facing opposite directions in a river. We'll get fresh air from the top half, fresh water from the bottom. We'll wire fence the openings, so animals don't get through. The third world-ripper will keep to its normal function."

Cadmus's eyes went blank. Madlin knew the look. There were calculations going on within that skull, merits being assigned values and drawbacks being subtracted. Probabilities

for any eventuality were assigned and factored into the equations. It was all rough math, but it was what kept the Mad Tinker ticking. He needed the numbers.

“Even if they think of the moon, he’ll never find us,” Cadmus murmured.

“It’s settled then. Start planning the modifications to the machine. We’re claiming the moon as our own.”



Grab a copy of *World-Ripper War*, book 6 of the *Twinborn Chronicles*, and continue your adventure now.

