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Riveted



Par Meljean Brook
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurMeljean Brook, the New York Times bestselling author of The Iron Duke and Heart of Steel returns to the Iron Seas with a riveting new adventure of steampunk and passionate romance...A century after a devastating volcanic eruption forced Iceland's inhabitants to abandon its shores, the island is enshrouded in legend. Fishermen tell tales of giant trolls guarding the land, and of seductive witches who steal men's hearts. But the truth behind the legends is mechanical, not magic - and the mystery of the island a matter of life and death for a community of women who once spilled noble blood to secure their freedom.Five years ago, Annika unwittingly endangered that secret, but her sister Klla took the blame and was exiled. Now Annika serves on the airship Phaton, flying from port to port in search of her sister, and

longing to return home . . . but that home is threatened when expedition leader David Kentewess comes aboard. Determined to solve the mystery of his own origin, David will stop at nothing to expose Annika's secrets. But when disaster strikes, leaving David and Annika stranded on a glacier and pursued by a madman, their very survival depends on keeping the heat rising between them - and generating lots of steam . . . Riveted by Meljean Brook is steampunk romance at its very best . . . and steamiest. Praise for Meljean Brook: 'A stunning blend of steampunk setting and poignant romance - smart, sexy, breathtaking, and downright addicting' Ilona Andrews 'Meljean Brook has brilliantly defined the new genre of steampunk romance' Jayne Ann Krentz Meljean Brook lives in Oregon with her family. She is the author of the Iron Seas steampunk series, which include *The Iron Duke* and *Heart of Steel*, and are also published by Penguin. For more information and Iron Seas extras, please visit www.meljeanbrook.com. Extrait Chapter 1

Before Annika had begun her journey, her mother had assured her that the people in the New World weren't all that different from the women in their village of Hannasvik. Annika's mother reminded her of how the peoples of Africa and Europe had sailed across the Atlantic four hundred years ago, fleeing from the Mongol Horde that had ridden from the east on the backs of their conquering war machines, just as Hanna and the Englishwomen had escaped the New World slavers and had made their home in Iceland a century before. She'd spoken of the enormous mechanical warriors that the New Worlders had built on their coastlines, sentinels that served a warning to the Horde, should that great empire ever develop a navy and follow them across the sea, just as Hannasvik's trolls protected their village and intimidated any enemies who might attempt to drive them from their home. The Horde never followed the New Worlders, however. The sentinels stood for centuries, staring out over the open sea while wars over territory and trade routes were fought behind their backs, and they were slowly stripped of their armaments and engines. And they were slowly falling apart. Annika glanced up through the drizzling rain and eyed the immense Castilian warrior guarding the gates to the port city of Navarra. In the four years since she'd left Hannasvik and joined Phaton's crew, Annika had come to accept the truth of her mother's words: Individually, the people of the New World weren't that different from those in her village. The governments and rulers, however, must have been. No elder in Hannasvik would have allowed Annika or any of the other engineers to neglect their trolls, not when lives depended upon their maintenance. The same obviously wasn't true in the New World, and Castile's sentinel was the worst. Aboard Phaton, Annika had seen every machine still standing along the Atlantic coastline from Johannesland's colossus in the north to the Far Maghreb's twin warriors, three thousand miles south of the equator, and the warrior in Navarra was by far the most decrepit. Rust ate away at its plate armor and crested helmet; corrosion pitted the iron around every bolt and rivet. Sand had drifted into the crevices, forming a solid mass at every joint, topped by grassy nests. Gray seagull dung crusted the spiked shoulders and gauntlets. Once a marvelous and deadly machine, now it was simply dangerous. Even if the sentinel had still possessed the engines to walk, the great hinged knees would have buckled after a single step. Struts buttressed its lower half now, a framework of steel supporting the towering legs that served as Navarra's port gates. What a horrible waste. If the Horde had come to the New World, they likely wouldn't have been intimidated by such useless machines . . . unless the New Worlders' defensive strategy was to crush any invaders beneath a rusted ruin. More likely, however, visitors to the city would be killed by falling pieces. Visitors like Annika. Only an hour earlier, she had walked the north port road through the gate and into the Castilian city without being crushed, but while she'd been at the printer's office purchasing another season of personal advertisements, an icy breeze had begun to blow in from the ocean, stinging her cheeks with rain and sand. A strong gust might rip away the sentinel's giant hand or armored shoulder and throw it to the ground, squashing Annika in the street. If a steamcoach didn't squash her first. A horn blasted near her right ear. Two tons of rolling iron sped by, the front wheel whipping her skirts forward. With a yelp, Annika yanked the red silk tight to her leg before the rear wheel could catch the fabric and rip it away or drag her along the sandy road behind it. That damned idiot driver. Only a blind man wouldn't have seen her walking along in a brilliant crimson skirt and canary yellow coat. Though the coach was already lost from her sight beyond its dense trail of smoke and steam, she yelled after him, *You rotting rabbit chaser!* Pointless, but satisfying until she sucked in a lungful of the acrid smoke. Coughing, she pounded her fist over her chest, then glanced over her shoulder just in time to avoid the three-wheeled cart that rattled around a horse-drawn wagon and attempted to squeeze between the plodding beast and her leg. Her fierce scowl went unnoticed by the driver. Well, hang them all. It was true that the row of shops that separated the north and south roads made narrow corridors of each street, leaving little room to maneuver, but they were headed in the same direction, and the port gates were only a hundred yards away. Was running her down to gain a few seconds

truly necessary? Given the manner that some of them handled their vehicles, she suspected they were aiming for her. Perhaps they were. Perhaps she had broken some unspoken Castilian rule that no one aboard Phaton had thought to warn her about. Perhaps she was unintentionally giving a message: Please crush me to a bleating pulp alongside this road. And now that the thought had entered her mind, it wouldn't leave. She looked over her shoulder again. No vehicles were bearing down on her . . . yet. Oh, and her mother would have been shaking her head now, telling Annika that her dread was a product of her imagination. That might have been true, once. Growing up, Annika's tendency to woolgather had been a source of consternation and amusement for the women in the village. Her imagination had continually gotten the best of her and was precisely why she currently served as second engineer aboard an airship, flying from port to port, rather than eating supper every night in her mother's cozy earthen home. She often fancied dangers that weren't there and daydreamed when she should have been wary. No longer, though. Within a few months of joining Phaton's crew, Annika had discovered that port cities in the New World each came with a unique set of dangers, and she learned to be wary until she was familiar with them. Manhattan City's entry inspectors didn't just examine the documents proving her origin and certifying that she wasn't infected by the Hordes nanoagents. They groped her legs and arms to make certain she wasn't hiding a mechanical apparatus beneath her clothing and swinging a fist at an officer who groped too fervently would land her in a cell until her airship's captain bailed her out. Inside the city, a curse spoken within hearing distance of a constable resulted in a hefty fine; exposing a bare ankle or elbow earned a rebuke and a trip in a paddy wagon back to the port's gates, where her salacious behavior was reported to Captain Vashon and the airship threatened with docking sanctions. In Oyapock, however, Annika could have walked naked down the paved streets without garnering a second look and given the number of light-fingered war orphans who swarmed visitors entering Libers capital city, it was only by virtue of her trouser buckles that her pants weren't stolen off her bottom while she wore them. On her first visit to Oyapock, Annika might have considered nudity a blessing, however. The city sat at the mouth of the Orinoco River; accustomed to colder climes, even Annika's lightest clothing had seemed to suffocate her. But the urchins hadn't left her nude on that trip; they'd taken her money and her hair instead. She hadn't felt them lift the purse from her waist. A slight tug at the back of her head had been the only warning before her thick braid had disappeared and her curls sprang into a dark halo. With her hand in her newly shorn hair, she stared in open-mouthed shock as they'd scampered away. She learned, though. Now she kept her hair short and only carried as much money as she needed into Oyapock, leaving the bulk on the airship. Annika took her valuables with her in Port-au-Prince. Though a Vashon airship was welcome at any of the French islands in the Caribbean, Phaton wasn't exempt from arbitrary searches by the king's men looking for treasonous nobles or cargo left unaccounted for on the tariff sheets. When Annika had reported her money missing from her berth after a search, Phaton's old goat of a quartermaster had laughed before informing Annika that she'd paid *le fou de limpt*. She hadn't known enough French to understand him then, but his meaning had been clear: Only a fool left her money on-board when the king's men came. Annika preferred to take it with her, anyway. Though many of the French cities seemed to be sinking into an elegant ruin, all trading routes led through the Caribbean, and the islands were ripe with spices and fruits unlike any she'd ever had in Iceland. The fish seemed flakier and the mutton lighter when eaten in a French market, and the stalls were filled with lustrous fabrics that she couldn't resist purchasing. King's men or no, Annika always left the islands with an empty purse. Now, Annika knew each city's quirks well enough that she rarely felt trepidation passing through the port gates. Navarra was no exception and in many ways, was pleasant to visit. Entering the city was painless, the inspection process consisting of a glance at her papers and a wave through the gates. No orphans waited to steal her money. The drapers sold cloth that matched the French markets in quality, if not quantity; the food was bold and tangy, and the people she spoke with no more rude or friendly than in any other city, even when she stammered along in her butchered Spanish. But she knew not to enter the city if any part of it was burning. She knew that if a crowd began forming in the streets, she needed to return to Phaton as quickly as possible. The queen's guard wouldn't care whether she was actually participating in the bread riot; simply being in the area was enough to justify arrest, and Annika had never heard of any crew member of any airship returning from a Castilian gaol. Since leaving home, she'd been as wary as her sense and instincts dictated. And if her imagination suggested a danger that didn't exist, no harm was done . . . except to her nerves. A shout came from another vehicle, the words barely audible over the huffing engine but she didn't understand much Spanish, anyway. Shoulders stiff in expectation of being run down, she glanced around. A cab driver gestured and shouted from two feet away, probably telling her to use the wooden walkway that ran along the front of the shops. She would have used it, if there'd been room. But a

church must have been distributing food nearbymen, women, and children with sunken cheeks and tired eyes stood in lines on the weathered boards, shuffling forward now and again, everyone quiet and orderly. The fried sweetbread Annika had purchased near the printers office suddenly weighed like a rock in her stomach. In many ways, the New World was nothinglike Hannasvik. There was hunger in her villageoh, shed known it many times, when the winters had been long and the nets empty, when the flocks had been thinned by the wild dogs, when even the rabbits seemed scarcebut if one person lacked food, then everyone in the village did. Here, she dared not even give any of the people the few coins left in her purse. If seen, shed be arrested for inciting disorder. And though she could imagine many ways to secretly pass the money to someone, she could also imagine the gaol too well if she were caught. What a strange land, where giving a small bit of help might put a noose around her neck. Oh, but she missed home. Longing gripped her chestto see her mother, to feel the heat of a trolls belly as she stoked its furnace, to smell the sea and the smoking fish and the sheep. But she couldnt return, not yet. Not until she found her sister, Klla. Until then, she was fortunate that Phaton had become something of a home, tooand it was not far away now. She was almost to the port gates.

Prudently, she opened her canvas umbrella to shield herself from the seagulls rain that fell from the buttresses. Ahead, directly beneath the center of the sentinel, port officers watched the south road from a wooden guardhouse, making certain that no one attempted to avoid the inspections on the north road and enter Navarra via the southern gate. Beyond the guardhouse, the sand-strewn cobblestone road widened to accommodate the shops and pubhouses serving the aviators and passengers who werent allowed into the city. Steamcoaches idled in front of the inns, the liveried porters loading and unloading luggage. A strong gust blew more sand into her face. Around her, above her, the sentinel and the supporting framework seemed to shudder. With the sound of droppings splattering against the taut canvas, Annika didnt dare look upand she resisted the urge to break into a run. Sense reminded her that the sentinel had weathered the hurricanes that roared up the coast every summer; surely it could survive a bit more wind. On the other hand, how many times had she heard the story of the shepherdess who killed a giant with a single stone . . . ? Annika quickened her step. Over the docks, the airships swayed and bobbed in the wind, pulling against their tethers like fat haddock fighting on fishing lines. A large cargo carrier, Phaton didnt appear to move as much as the smaller airships, but Annika knew the mooring anchors groaned under the strain and the cables vibrated with tension. Far ahead, dark clouds crowded the eastern horizon. If that storm moved in before Phaton had been fully loaded, the night promised to be a rough one. Theyd be jostled in their bunks and stumbling around the decks until the tether was unhooked. Not so terrible, except that the second matewho slept in the bunk above Annikastended to become portsick on such nights. Another shout, this one from her left. Annika paid it no mind. If the person wasnt set to run her down, their business was none of hers, and the noise simply added to the cacophony on the road. Someone was always shouting near port gates; only the language changed. She thought it had been either Spanish or Portuguese, but was only certain the voice had been male. Even that had become familiar. Since leaving Iceland to search for Klla, shed become accustomed to new cities, a new lifeand to seeing men everywhere. They were exactly as Annikas mother had described them: much like women, but hairier. And, when part of a group, stupider. The shout came again. Closer, louder. Annika slowed. A uniformed port officer had left the guardhouse and strode in her direction, his thick mustache shadowing his frown. Annika glanced to the side. No one stood nearby. The guards gaze had fixed on . . . her. Her heart clenched, then began racing. Oh, no. But he was only one man, and not in a group. Whatever it was, surely shed be able to reason with him. A gray dropping splattered against his hat brim. The officer didnt seem to notice. He spoke again and she felt stupid. She didnt understand a single word. Most likely it was Spanish, but so quickly said that she couldnt make it out. Stopping a short distance away, he held out his hand, impatiently flicking his fingers. He wanted something from her. But what? Annika glanced down at herself, looking for the answer. She didnt carry anything but her umbrella, and didnt know how to ask him what the problem was. Her knowledge of the language didnt extend far beyond No estoy infectadaand Cunto cuesta? Her fingers tightened on the umbrella stem. Her imagination didnt help her now. She could only picture the worst. Sudden nerves made her words loud and shrill. Parlez-vous franais? Annika had been forced to learn French when shed joined Phatons crew, and not just because Captain Vashon hailed from the Caribbean islands. French was the traders languageand this was a port city. Surely he understood a little. Dismay slid through her when his mouth firmed. Slowly, he said, Mustrame . . . sus . . . cartas. His voice sharpened on cartas. Annika wracked her brain. Had she been blocking a cart or another vehicle? Was it something else? Not the identifying papers she had tucked away in her purse; she knew the word they used for that: documentos. But they only asked for those when she was passing the inspection point on the

sentinels north side. Why stop her while she was leaving? Once, she had been briefly detained in Manhattan City when a constable had asked where she had acquired her clothing. Even though she had spoken English in an odd version of it, to be certain, even odder than she had heard spoken in London, it had still taken Annika several minutes to realize that he suspected her of stealing the clothing, because the expensive fabric lay beyond a stokers means. And despite her explanation that she had purchased the silk on the cheap at the French markets and sewed the pieces herself, he had not seemed to believe her until a nearby group of women had come to her aid. Laughing at the constable, they had assured him that Annika could not have stolen the clothes, because no woman of quality would own anything so ridiculous as a white skirt over indigo trousers, pairing it with a lavender blue bodice. No lady would ever be seen in a costume resembling a Liber flag. Today, Annika wore crimson and yellow. Perhaps the colors had marked her in some way and she supposed that she did resemble a Lusitanian flag. But what of it? They were at war with Castile. There were no women to save her now.

She scanned the faces of the people nearby, hoping to recognize someone whom she could call upon. Though several travelers had turned to watch the encounter, she did not see any of Phatons crew members. And what stranger would dare help? Not here, not in Castile. Panic fluttered wildly in her chest. She faced the guard again. Do you speak English? As he had, she spoke slowly, trying to make herself understood. Please tell me, what is the matter? With another sharp word and gesture, he shook his head. His hand shot out, seizing her wrist. He turned toward the guardhouse. No, please! Wait! She dragged her heels, trying to slow him without openly resisting. Her heart pounded. Only with great effort did she stop herself from smashing her umbrella over his head and sprinting to the docks and Phaton. Desperate, she tried again. Norse? Mlt kann norske? He demands to see your letters of entry. A male voice came from behind her. She barely had a moment to feel her relief when the newcomer spoke again, but not in English and not directed at her. The guard looked around and stiffened, as if in alarm. He let Annika go, his hand dropping to the short club at his belt. Retrese, seor! Whoever he was, the stranger apparently posed more of a threat than Annika did. She opened the purse tucked within her skirts, stealing a glance back. Beneath a wide-brimmed hat, the man wore a faint smile, not exactly an expression of amusement, she thought, but as if he had heard an old, worn-out joke. A gleaming monocle concealed his left eye. Focused on the guard, he lifted his hands as if to show the officer that he was unarmed. Oh, but he was armed. Annikas fingers froze around her folded papers, and she took another, longer look. His right hand resembled every other persons, large, perhaps, with broad palm and long fingers, but proportional to his height. His left hand and wrist were of the same size, yet they were human only in shape; the skeletal limb had been constructed of steel. The fluid movement as he spread his mechanical fingers was indistinguishable from the same movement in his right hand, and spoke to the intricacy of the design, the contraption was not stiff, but responsive . . . and probably incredibly strong. No, he did not carry any weapons. But from the guards perspective, the mans hand was a weapon and the man himself a danger to Castile. Prosthetic limbs were common enough in the New World; if not used by soldiers injured at war, then laborers who had suffered accidents in the factories and fields. Those replacement limbs were often stiff and clunky, however, a hook for a hand, a wooden leg strapped into a boot and only if replacements were used at all. But there was nothing clunky about this mans elegant hand, which meant that it had not just been contoured around his arm or strapped on, but grafted on so that the steel contraption had become a working part of his body. Only the Hordes nanoagents could graft a mechanical apparatus to human flesh, making it as maneuverable as a natural arm. This man had to be infected with those tiny machines, the same machines that the Horde had used to forcibly graft tools onto their laborers. Most of those tools had not been designed to function or appear as human as this mans did, but Annika knew that it was not the hand itself that alarmed the guard. It was the nanoagent infection. Although an infected person was stronger and could heal faster, the nanoagents had also allowed the Horde to control the populations in the occupied territories of England and North Africa, using radio signals from tall broadcasting towers. A few of the towers had been destroyed, freeing the people in England and Morocco, but many in the New World thought the revolutions were only a temporary setback in the Hordes inevitable advance across the ocean. Others in the New World feared that the nanoagents would reanimate their corpses after death and transform them into hungry, savage monsters, like the zombies who roamed much of Europe and Africa, leaving it uninhabitable. Others were revolted by the idea of tiny machines crawling around inside their bodies like bugs. Annika knew too many of the infected to share the same fears, but the port officer obviously did not, he knew many infected people, and still feared that the nanoagents might spread. Brandishing his club, the officer gestured toward the nearest inn. Annika did not need to understand his sharp commands to know that he was ordering the stranger to turn back, away from the gates. The stranger did not retreat. He looked to Annika, and the turn of his head offered a

better impression of the features between his hat brim and gray wool scarf. He possessed a clean-shaven jaw, perhaps in the native style or simply because a beard would never grow in evenly. Pale scars raked the left side of his face, with several wide, ragged stripes running diagonally from forehead to cheek. Oh! And that was not a monocle at all, but some sort of optical contraption that had been embedded into his temple, which shielded his left eye with a dark, reflective lens. Utterly marvelous. What could he see through that? A noble was poisoned last week. He spoke clearly, the tones deep. She couldn't place his accent but had no trouble understanding him. Rumor is that the assassin was a Liber woman who carried Lusitanian papers. So she had been marked not just by the colors of her dress, but also by the darkness of her skin. Truly, if Annika were the assassin, she wouldn't have announced it so boldly. With a sigh, she unfolded her documents and presented them to the guard. Norway, she said, and because the officer seemed reluctant to look away from the stranger long enough to verify her origin, Annika helpfully pointed to the proper line. Born in Bergen. His gaze darted to the papers. Apparently not the least bit concerned about an assassin now, he waved her on. For a moment, she stared at him in disbelief. He could have so easily disrupted no, destroyed her life, as if she were nothing. Now he set her free in the same dispassionate manner. It did not engender grateful thoughts, yet she still managed a Gracias, señor. It did not come out as genuinely as she intended, but he didn't seem to note the bitter anger lacing her reply and Annika was not a fool to wait around long enough for him to recognize it. She turned and set a brisk pace, her heart still hammering. The stranger waited, as if making certain that she wouldn't be further disturbed, before falling into step beside her, his hands clasped behind his back. Since coming to the New World, she'd often been told that her manners were coarse, but Annika thought that the application of genuine gratitude could never be found lacking. Thank you, sir. I can't express how much I appreciate your interference. He nodded. She thought that would be the end of it, that now he would return to the two men waiting in front of a nearby inn, and who were obviously his companions. Dressed in the same style of wool overcoat that buckled asymmetrically across the chest, long trousers, and sturdy boots, the men watched them pass. The young one sporting a pointed red beard and curling mustache seemed to make a remark; the elder shook his head and laughed, his breath puffing in the cold air. Beside them, porters loaded crates onto a lorry. They all must have been standing there when the port officer had shouted for her to stop, she realized. Her rescuer had heard her desperation and come to her aid. She glanced up at the stranger again. He walked to the left of her, his eye contraption only visible as a glint of metal beyond the bridge of his aquiline nose. His hair was as black as hers, though without a hint of curl. The straight ends touched his shoulders, the forward strands drawn away from his face and contained by four steel beads tucked behind his ears. Did he intend to accompany her all the way to Phaton? Surely that wasn't necessary. I'm out of danger now, if you wish to return to your people. My people? His brow rose, and he glanced toward the men. Ah. They'll manage without me. And she wouldn't? She ought not to say that, however, not after he'd rendered such an incredible service to her. She ought not say it, and so of course she did. But I can't manage without you? His sudden grin was nothing like his earlier smile, which had seemed a weary response to an old jest. This appeared to burst through him as if he knew laughter was the only reply he could give. Annika had to smile in return, and then laugh when he asked, I trust you were not hired to kill a Castilian noble? Perhaps I was, she said. If I were a clever assassin, I'd carry fraudulent papers that claim I was born in Norway, not Lusitania. Are they fraudulent, then? Yes. Not for the purpose of assassination, however, but for the purpose of mobility. This exchange had become unexpectedly fun, however, and so she played along. Oh, of course. And what is your true origin? A hidden village on Iceland's western shore. But even as a joke, she could not risk exposing her people, and chose the farthest location away from them. A smugglers haven in Australia. That seemed to disappoint him. His grin had already faded to a pleasant, amused expression, but now she detected a hint of frustration in the tightness of his mouth and the intensity of his gaze. He was truly looking for an answer, Annika realized. This was not simply polite conversation to pass the time; he wanted to know where she was from. Or was that just her imagination? She had guarded the truth of her origin for four years. Perhaps the constant vigilance made her suspect everyone of trying to discern it. When he didn't respond to that lie, she covered her unease with a dramatic sigh. In truth, she said, Australia would be far more exciting, but alas, Norway it was and is where I am bound again. You fly out immediately? Perhaps Annika imagined the sudden tension in his voice, but she couldn't mistake the way his gaze moved over her face, as if searching for the answer or hoping for a specific reply. The airship departs later tonight, she confirmed. The stranger's lips tightened before resolve seemed to firm his expression. He nodded. En route to Bergen? Eventually. Phaton was scheduled to fly to the Norwegian port within a month, but it would not be a direct flight. Yes, she said, her unease deepening. Why did he ask so specifically?

Perhaps he was only making small talk, but she wasn't comfortable with the direction he'd taken. Best to change the subject. And if this truly was conversation, it was time that she held up her part and made intrusive inquiries of her own. Will you also be departing soon? Or do you make a habit of waiting near port gates and running to a stranger's aid? No. Typically, I run after erupting volcanoes. To study them? Annika guessed. She couldn't think of any other reason to do such a thing and only if it paid well. That is your profession? When he nodded, she studied him more closely. What sort of person made a living from such a thing? She had witnessed eruptions in Iceland before, and would have said that only a reckless fool would go chasing after one. This man didn't appear foolish, however, and his manner seemed too contained to be reckless. Something else must be driving him to pursue such a dangerous occupation, something that he didn't readily show. Asking him to reveal that reason, however, would require Annika to venture beyond the boundaries of intrusive and into unforgivably rude. Even she couldn't cross that line. She settled for, I didn't realize volcanoes were so fast that one had to run after them. His amusement returned. In truth, I more often run away from them. She arched her brows and glanced at his mechanical hand, still clasped behind his back. Not always fast enough? No, that was another sort of explosion. His gaze narrowed. You've spent time in England. In England? Well, Yes? Confusion tripped her up. What an odd response. She had spent a little time in that country when Phaton's route took her there. But why would such a statement follow hers . . . Oh. Fierce heat bloomed in her cheeks. Prosthetics and mechanical apparatuses were so common in England as to be unremarkable. But in the New World, such topics were handled with delicacy, if not outright avoided. Her insensitive comment must have distressed him, though he hid it well. Perhaps that was an indication of his fine manners; he didn't point out her lack of them, though he had every reason to. She had long come to terms with her failings, but Annika hated knowing that she might have hurt someone with them. I am so sorry. How horrid of me to make light of injuries that must have been painful. He shrugged. And long ago. Was he dismissing the topic or her apology? He didn't seem distressed, but rather uninterested in discussing himself and examining her features as if interested in her. Well, if he wanted to know what sort of woman she was, he was soon to learn that she had difficulty letting anything go without proper resolution. Whenever it happened, I am sorry for my words now, she said. I'm often told that I don't possess any proper sensibilities, but that doesn't excuse. Who tells you this? Everyone, she said ruefully, and the stranger laughed before subjecting her to a considering look. If you wish to make amends, he said, eat supper with me now. That was not an offer she expected to come from someone with manners. Not offended, but incredibly surprised, she shook her head. Pardon? I believe I misheard. Share a meal with me at the inn, he said unmistakably, before softening his expression with a smile. I wouldn't take advantage of a woman's obligation to me, but I have no choice. If you leave this evening, I'll have no other opportunity to enjoy your company, and I want to know you better. The intensity of his gaze deepened as he spoke, as if the entirety of his being had focused on gaining her consent. Annika stared up at him, uncertain how to respond. She'd have liked to spend more time with him, too. She wanted to know why he chased volcanoes, and what had possessed him to come to her aid and there was nothing that forbade her from sharing a meal with someone. But her instincts were ringing, and she couldn't ignore the alarm they raised. She had been propositioned before. She'd been flirted with before. This was . . . different. Though she couldn't have articulated why she felt the need to be wary, Annika was certain that this man wanted something from her but not company, not courting, not even to share a bed. I'm sorry, she said, feeling very stiff. The captain has asked that we all return to the airship early, so that we're aboard before the storm hits. He nodded, but she saw the clench of his jaw, the frustration that suddenly shadowed his expression. Annika continued her brisk pace. The stranger remained at her side, but as they crossed from the cobblestones onto the wooden docks, the rumble of lorry engines and the shouts of the stevedores made further conversation impossible. Annika walked in silence, her thoughts in tumult. Perhaps she'd been mistaken? Perhaps she was only wary because his offer had been so unexpected. Perhaps she'd just insulted him again. If so, nothing could be done now. With relief, she reached Phaton's mooring station. The cargo lift had been raised against the side of the airship, but the ladder hung down to the docking boards. Annika stopped and folded her umbrella before turning to the stranger, who had tilted his head back to look up at the airship. She had to tilt her head back to look at him. Oh, he was quite tall and so close. Rarely did Annika feel small, but standing next to him, she did. Thank you again. His gaze lowered. Though his smile had not returned, she thought he seemed pleased. Satisfied, perhaps. You travel aboard Phaton? I've heard that she's a fine ship. Yes. She caught the rope ladder, steadied it. Very fine. He nodded. I will leave you, then. I wish you a safe journey, miss. I wish the same for you. Politely, he touched his hat and stood, waiting . . . for her to climb safely aboard, she realized, and felt

silly of a sudden. All this way, he had only been helpful. It had been kind of him to stay with her until he made certain that she arrived at her destination unharmed. It had been kind of him to offer a meal. Still, Annika sensed his gaze on her as she climbed the ladder and could not shake the feeling that the stranger hadn't gotten what he wanted, and that he wasn't done with her. That she would see him again, that he would be waiting for her in Bergen . . . or somewhere else. But perhaps that was only her imagination.

Revue de presse
A stunning blend of steampunk setting and poignant romance - smart, sexy, breathtaking, and downright addicting (Ilona Andrews)
Meljean Brook has brilliantly defined the new genre of steampunk romance (Jayne Ann Krentz)