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SHORT STORIES

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Short Story Samples

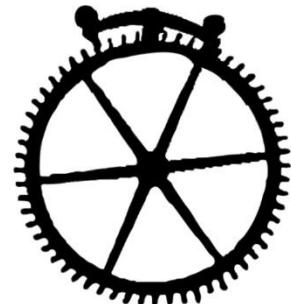
Crossroads of the Sky

by Jenna Eatough

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Genre: Steampunk

“Annabelle Mable Jean Wheeler,” a voice boomed behind me, taking full advantage of my Pa’s Catholic bent when it came to names. Odd, since that hadn’t been the religion he professed believing before dying or, more important, before me being born. “A lady your age shouldn’t be working on a fueling platform.” I groaned. Was it already time for that conversation again?



Turning, I crossed my arms, eyeing Mr. Jones. “And just what would you have me doing? Ain’t no family or person to take me in below.”

He looked me over like I was some riddle to be solved. Either that or a particularly funny bone the hounds had decided to fight over. “I’m sure I could convince Miss Hardy to take you into her circle.” His voice rumbled as slowly as a passenger train pulling into station. Wasn’t me he was thinking of helping when he thought of Miss Hardy. He was just thinking of an excuse to see her sister.

“Oh, I’m sure you could,” I said, all sweetness and smiles. “But whatever would I do there? Quilting and praying?” I tapped my lips with one finger. “Supposed I could add in storytelling. Like that one time the Dart passed through...”

Jones gawked at me, the languid smile slipping off his face to be replaced with a scowl. “You wouldn’t.”

I gave him my most mischievous smile in reply. “Try me.”

Grumbling, Mr. Jones turned away. After a brief search of the deck, he decided on someone a bit easier to pick on. Muttering, he strode away. Good. Turning back to the rail, I looked over it to the Vista with a sigh. This conversation was beyond tiring. When would Jones realize I wasn’t about to get grounded and was his best motor hand besides?

I glanced over to where Archie was working—more like barely not destroying. He struck station one with his wrench and I rolled my eyes. No, I didn't have much competition in him. Besides, with three stations, three capable of motors were best. Archie was first motor, Irving was chief, and I was the second. Though honest, I should have been first. Shoving away from the rail, I walked over. I caught his wrist on a backswing. "Here, let me."

Archie shrugged and handed me the wrench then stood. He swung his arms as I crouched, like some crazed windmill. "It ain't gonna give easily." Leaning over, I grunted in response and tucked my disagreeable red hair behind my ear, wishing again Irving would let me crop it. "I've been trying to get the valve open for hours. It just ain't gonna give. Irving will have to..." He trailed off.

I glanced over my shoulder as I yanked on the wrench. A hunk of a ship drifted into view. The rusty metal sides had definitely seen better days, as had the cannon. The balloon holding it up was more patches than material, and she belched steam like Irving after bean night. But she was ours, and that was supposed to be proud or something.

A couple of the roughnecks emerged from the cover, swarming toward the dock the ship headed for. Of course, they'd pick the one close to where I was working. Mr. Jones wasn't far behind the boys. He glanced at me, and I hunched over, pressing my shoulder against the wrench. I watched his nose twitch, knowing he was thinking of at least sending me inside.

The valve finally gave before he could say anything. I yanked more tools from the pack Irving had left, and Mr. Jones snorted and turned away. "Greetings," he called out when the ship came in range. "What's the word?" I scoffed. The roughnecks hadn't even caught the lines yet and he was already demanding news.

"Not good," a voice called back from the ship, only slightly damped by the ropes whizzing through the air. No more was offered until the boys finished hauling the lines taught and tied them off. The man stepped off the ship, pulling off his gloves. Irving was already moving to connect the pumps to the ship's tanks. "They're sending an army."

Mr. Jones' brows rose to hide in his bangs. "They?"

"The US, President Buchanan in particular." The man shook his head sadly.

“Ain’t they already done enough? I mean, after trying to get requisitions out of us. Who’re they sending?” Mr. Jones turned the man away as he spoke. Probably trying to corral him and pump info out while we pumped supplies in.

“Johnston,” the man said as they neared the door. “I’ve got orders straight from Daniel Wells.” They disappeared inside before I could hear anymore. Archie came shuffling back. I blew out a breath trying to get my hair out of my eyes again. “Here,” I said, standing. I shoved the tool back in his hands. “Think you can handle the ship alone?”

“Of course,” Archie protested as I hurried away in the opposite direction of Mr. Jones and his guest. I wasn’t daft enough to try eavesdropping. Not when I had a better, easier solution.

Reaching the back of the station, I hauled the hatch open and slid down the ladder. “Irving.” I rubbed my eyes to try adjusting them to the dim light quicker. He was in the back next to the porthole. That was the only natural light in the place, and it faced the wrong direction this time of day with the platform’s positioning. “Irving.” I hurried to the edge of his table.

The man in question held up a finger, motioning me to silence. Skidding to a stop, I hopped onto the stool next to the table and watched him. His hair was graying and shaggy, hiding his expression as he leaned over the table. He was surrounded by an oddity of equipment with no distinction between what was broke, working, or experimental. I had the feeling experimental held his attention today.

Irving reached to pick up his blowtorch, the fuel sloshing in the reservoir. Pumping the tank, he frowned and lowered his goggles over his eyes. I grabbed mine as well, settling them in place before he could start the blaze. I didn’t need to be told twice anymore. Or once even. Blue flame shot out of the mouth of the torch as he twisted the valve open. Must have heated it before I showed up. As he lowered the flame to his project a white light flared, blinding me. I cried out and turned away, eyes watering.

Irving did more than cry. A string of cusses filled the room followed by the blowtorch’s rumble cutting off. “It’s ruined,” Irving said.

I hopped off my bench and put a hand on his shoulder. “You’ll get it.” I grinned at the man reassuringly. He’d cared for me since my parents’ deaths crossing the plains. I

knew better what he was capable of than anyone. He turned toward me and pressed his forehead against mine for a moment.

“Course I will.” He replaced the blowtorch and pulled his goggles off. Grabbing a cloth, he rubbed at the soot covering them. “I’m sure you didn’t come down to watch that. Who’re our guests?”

“Some legion people, I think.” I leaned closer to his project as he spoke, but it really was a charred mess.

“Ah, no wonder Jones sent you down.” Irving said. “Not a proper crowd for a young lady.” I glanced up to see him grinning. Jones might want me gone, but Irving sure didn’t.

“He didn’t send me down.”

Irving nodded his head once. “So, what’s the news distracting him from protecting your virtue?”

“Please, he ain’t worried about my virtue. He’s looking for...” I cut off, ducking my head as Irving scowled at me. “Well, he ain’t,” I muttered sullenly.

“The news, Annabelle.”

I shrugged. “Something about Johnston bringing an army here.”

Irving cleared his throat and rose before I could say anything else. “Stay here until I return.” He darted up the ladder before I could protest. Not that I would’ve. Irving would tell me everything he learned soon enough.

A Magical Eve

by Jenna Eatough

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Genre: Urban Fantasy



"I want a glass of milk." Heidi sighed looking over at Andy who was sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor. His bright red Christmas jammies almost matched the color of his face. The happy snowman's expression did not at all. A tantrum was coming and, of course, her husband Braden was at the store getting eggs to replace what Andy had broken.

Wringing the last bit of raw yolk from the washcloth Heidi shook her head. "You've had enough today." Setting down the rag she knelt in front of Andy. "Do you want Santa to come?"

While the question forestalled a wail, it hadn't averted it completely. He still had that distrustful glint in his eyes. Lips turned down, he nodded his head as he twisted the pant cuff in his hands.

"Good," Heidi said cheerfully. "I want him to come too, but in order for him to come you know what we have to do?"

"No," Andy shrieked his little fist swinging toward Heidi's face and missing by inches. "I'm not tired." Of course it wouldn't be that easy. Nothing was this holiday.

She grabbed his hand and shook her head. "You know we don't hit, Andy." He wiggled in her grip like a fish unhappy at being caught.

"I'm not going to bed," he said, ignoring her admonition.

Again, Heidi wishing they'd stayed home for Christmas instead of visiting Grandma Kirsten's farm. Andy was never this overtaxed at home, and that would have helped his mother's frazzled nerves stay intact. Grandma Kirsten's whims wouldn't have intruded there either. Heidi hadn't been back for a Christmas since Andy was born, but with her mother's passing they'd come.

Braden had argued for it. If it had been his grandmother and he'd been the last surviving relative, he'd want to be there. Heidi had relented agreeing that Grandma Kirsten wouldn't spend this year alone. Last minute tickets were bought and bags hurriedly packed; they'd been away before Heidi could rethink.

As if summoned by the thought, Grandma rushed into the kitchen. "Come on," she said. Her bright red coat was already on one arm as she struggled to twist her other into its sleeve. "If we don't leave now, we'll miss it."

"Grandma Kirsten, we're not going anywhere." Heidi twisted, placing her hand on the floor to keep her balance. "Andy's had enough today. It's bedtime so Santa can come." She looked at Kirsten, pleading with her to drop the subject.

"Adventure," Andy said behind her, clapping his hands.

"No adventure," Heidi said at the same time Grandma Kirsten said "Yes." Andy's snow boots thudded onto the kitchen floor. Drops of dirty snow melt from when Andy had made snow angels earlier splattered across the newly cleaned floor.

"Don't be such a stick, Heidi. You used to love our adventures, when you were little." Heidi doubted her mother's enthusiasm hadn't been forced. Midnight adventures and a child up before the sun didn't mix well. Andy wasn't any different than she had been.

No wait, her mother had embraced those nights. She'd always woken Heidi if she'd fallen asleep on the couch too early, wrapping her in a blanket against night's cold. Excited whispers had banished sleep from Heidi's eyes and they'd gone.

Grandma Kirsten had knelt down and was pulling on Andy's socks before Heidi could form her next protest. Looking at Andy, Heidi relented. The red flush of a tantrum had left his face, and he was giggling happily for a change. While giving in was not a great long term solution, right now she didn't have the energy to fight Andy and Grandma Kirsten. "Okay, we'll go on the adventure. But a short one," she said pointedly grabbing Grandma Kirsten's hand. She looked at her grandmother hoping her silent please would be understood.

"As short as a wisp's glimpse." Grandma Kirsten beamed at Heidi. Let out the breath she had been holding, Heidi nodded glad for the moment she had surrendered. That was

the first time since they arrived, Heidi hadn't seen the pain in Grandma Kirsten's eyes. The pain she knew echoed in her own.

Coughing she shoved herself up from the floor. "I'll get my coat and leave Braden a note."

"Don't worry, I'll get Andy ready." Grandma Kristen turned back to the little boy making silly faces at him. Grateful, Heidi hurried out of the room swallowing hard as she willed herself not to cry. Again. She wouldn't let the holiday be tainted by pain. At least not for Andy.