

Brassleggers **By Reverie Quist**



"Y'know, fellas, I really don't get it." I tip up my fedora and scratch at my wayward auburn bangs. "What does Howell need with a heap of old scrap metal?"

"'Old scrap metal' is hardly a fitting term, Sedgewick." Cracker looks up from the freshly unburied crate of clockwork and raises an eyebrow at me. "Even if it was, nothing that man does is mindless. If Howell requests it, it's important."

"Oh golly, Cracker, you've got a lotta blind trust for a man in our business." I tap a finger against my pistol and lean against the tailgate of the motorcar, peering around the musty, dusk-lit riverside road. "Whatdya think our daring leader means to use them for?"

With a heave, Cracker pulls the crate up out of the hole in the earth and sets it on the murky ground between us. "Well, he's been searching for parts like these all over both sides of the Atlantic," he murmurs, lifting up his spectacles and wiping the sweat off his brow. "He must've involved himself in some grand secret project."

"Ha! By the clock, I hope he has, and may I sink to the bottom of the river," I cackle. "Like we don't get enough excitement as it is!"

Cracker smirks, then turns to face the forest behind them. "Would our honored guest care to take a look?"

"I might."

Heart leaping at the sound of her voice, I turn to watch the young lady in her scruffy black dress slink out of the shadows and approach the crate. Brows knit and dark eyes ablaze under her straw hat, she crouches down to peer inside, letting her knees sink into the swampy earth.

"Hey, Penny, careful there," I chirp beside her, "you're mucking up your dress."

Penelope glances sideways at me through messy, ash-colored bangs. "Is it bothering you?"

"Eh," I grin, "not as much as it should."

Penelope gives me one of her almost-smiles, and for a split second, I forget how to breathe.

Her fingers brush against the twist of silver screws and the teeth of brass gears, and at her touch, they begin to glisten with an otherworldly shine. Penelope lets out a shaky breath, gazing down at the clockwork as if they're an old friend she thought she'd never see again.

"Well, Miss Penny?" Cracker leans in, gripping the crate's edges. "Were our sources right?"

Penelope meets his gaze, excitement glittering in her eyes. "Yes they were."

Bang!

I drop to all fours. Pushing up my fedora and leaning just past the edge of the car, I stare into the treeline behind us.

Two dark figures are outlined against the sinking red sun: one, a man holding an intimidating-looking briefcase, and the other, a lady ... holding a shotgun.

"Tripe degradation, it's them," I hiss. "Cracker, get the haul in the car, Penny, get it started."

Cracker seizes the crate and flings it into the back compartment of the car, slamming shut the tailgate after I snatch a screw and a sharp gear.

As the two figures slowly approach, the lady reloading her shotgun, Penelope jumps into the driver's seat. Thinking quickly, I step in front of the car and point my gun.

"What are you *doing*?" Penny shouts behind me.

Remembering what Cracker said about the clockwork, trusting Howell, and possibly losing a bit of my sanity, I watch the screw and gear start shimmering in my hands, then toss them into the air and cock the pistol.

"I have no idea," I shout back, "but I'm gonna enjoy it!"

I fire, and the bullet propels the clockwork forward, spinning like a rip saw in the direction of the armed lady. Instead of firing, she jerks her gun, forced to use it as a shield as the pieces shatter in a shower of sparks and ... green smoke.

"GO, GO, NOW, DRIVE, PENNY, DRIVE!" I shriek, hopping onto the car's hood. "HA! I can't believe that worked!"

Penny hits the gas. Holding onto the hood, I spot Cracker gripping the crate in the backseat as we barrel down the riverside.

The two dark figures don't have a car to follow us. They don't need one. One minute they're running behind the shadow of the trees, the next, they're gone, and the next, they reappear behind the trees closest to the car. I keep firing as I spot them, but they avoid each bullet like shadows.

"Right, merry accomplices, what in tarnation is our plan now?!" Cracker shouts, sticking his head out the window.

I shove my pistol in my pocket, and nearly fall off the hood of the car as a sudden *HONK* sounds from the river. I turn my head to look, quickly ducking under the blast of another gunshot.

Aces! There's a riverboat making its way along the water!

I shift toward Penelope, who's straining to see past me and watch the road.

"There's your target, love!" I shout, pointing to the riverboat. "Think you can make it?"

Penelope stares at me, then at the riverboat, then back at me.

"The things I do for you, Sedgewick." She starts gaining speed. "Cracker, grab the crate and be ready to throw it!"

And with that, she reaches the bank and lurches the motorcar headfirst into the river.

Just as the hood dives under, I catch Penelope fleeing from the driver's seat, leap off the roof of the car, and splash into the water, carrying her in my arms. I kick to keep our heads above the surface, shaking wet locks of hair from my eyes to see Cracker paddling towards us with the barely floating crate.

The men on the riverboat notice us, and in another moment, we're climbing their ladder aboard.

"Almost, darling, but not quite," I chuckle, helping Penelope up on deck and handing her back her river-soaked hat. I turn back to the riverboat men and scoff. "Women drivers, eh?"

The riverboat men laugh, then go on their way as if that explained the whole ordeal. I look back at Penelope, and ... oh. Yikes.

Cracker snorts at me, still hauling the crate of clockwork. Shooting him a glare, I place an apologetic kiss on Penelope's temple, then jump at a sudden call behind us.

"Lud love me, you three hooligans, you made it out alive!" a lilting, elegant voice declares.

I turn around. The voice belongs to a crisp, finely-dressed young gentleman with stylish sandy hair, a thin, well-combed mustache, and a sparkle in his eye that makes one think he has some wonderful secret to tell.

"Howell?" Cracker's jaw drops. "How did you ... what are you doing here?"

"And what on earth are you wearing?" I cackle at him.

Howell narrows his eyes at us, and hisses through smiling teeth, "Pray, Cracker, I'd prefer that name *not* be mentioned in this setting. A riverboat crowd is perfect to hide in," he

remarks, glancing out at the trees beyond the riverbank, “but we may not be the only ones who think that way, what?”

Cracker blushes, and, looking as if he wants to redeem himself, presents the crate to our leader in disguise.

Howell takes it and peers inside at its contents. “*Oh*, sink me, what a beautiful selection. Well aged, exotic; our clients will be simply giddy. Get it from the famous Horace Gavriil, did you?” He winks at Penelope.

I stifle a surprised laugh.

He’s painting us as bootleggers to hide us from our rivals. Maybe this man is a genius.

Penelope nods, instantly catching onto his act. “Only the best.”

Howell smiles at her, then turns to me. “Have any trouble with it, old chap?”

I smirk. “Nah. After a taste, I see why you were so eager to have it.” I tap a finger against my pistol and glance back at the trees. “It’s downright ... *delectable*.”