

FIREBRAND

BY A.
J.
HARTLEY
FROM
TOR
BOOKS

Steeplejack

FIREBRAND
A.
J.
HARTLEY
A
TOM
DOHERTY
ASSOCIATES
BOOK

NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

firebrand

Copyright © 2017 by A. J. Hartley

All rights reserved.

A Tor Teen Book

Published by Tom Doherty Associates

175 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10010

www.tor-forge.com

Tor® is a registered trademark of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC.

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-7653-8813-1 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-7653-8814-8 (e-book)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.

Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium

Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by e-mail at

MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: June 2017

Printed in the United States of America

0987654321

For my family

FIREBRAND

CHAPTER

1

THE THIEF HAD BEEN out of the window no more than a minute but had already shaken off the police. The only reason I could still see him was because up here we got the full flat glare of the Beacon two blocks over, because I knew where to look, and because he was doing what I would be doing if our positions were reversed. Moments after the theft had been reported and the building locked down, he had emerged from the sash window on the fourth floor of the War Office on Hanover Street—which was probably how he had gotten in in the first place—and had climbed up to the roof. Then he had danced along the steeply pitched ridgeline and across to the Corn Exchange by way of a cable bridge he had rigged earlier. The uniformed officers in the pearly glow of the gas lamps below blocked the doorways leading to the street, milling around like baffled chickens oblivious to the hawk soaring away above them. If he hadn't shot one of the guards on his way into the strong room, they wouldn't have even known he had been there.

But he had, and he was getting away with a roll of papers bound with what looked like red ribbon. I didn't know what

t they were, but
I had seen Willinghouse's face when the alarm had been raised and
knew how badly he needed them back.

Not Willinghouse himself. Bar-Selehm. The city needed them
back, and I, Anglet Sutonga, former steeplejack and now . . . something
else entirely, worked for the city. In a manner of speaking.

The thief paused to disassemble his cable bridge and, in the act of
turning, saw me as I rounded a brick chimney stack.
His hand went
for the pistol at his belt, the one that had already been fired twice

tonight, but he hesitated. There was no clearer way to announce his position to those uniformed chickens below us than by firing his gun. He decided to run, abandoning his dismantling of the bridge, betting that, whoever I was, I wouldn't be able to stay with him up here on the ornamented roofs and towers of the government district.

He was wrong about that, though he climbed expertly. I gave chase, sure-footed in my familiar steel-toed boots, as he skittered down the sloping tiles on the other side and vaulted across the alley onto a metal fire escape. He moved with ease in spite of his formal wear, and the only time he looked away from what he was doing was to check on my progress. As he did, he smiled, intrigued, a wide hyena grin that made me slow just a little. Because despite the half mask he was wearing over his eyes, I knew who he was.

They called him Darius. He was a thief, but because he was also white, famously elegant, and limited his takings to the jewelry of wealthy society ladies—plucked from their nightstands as they slept inches away—he was known by the more romantic name of “cat burglar.” I had never been impressed by the title. It seemed to me that

anyone whose idea of excitement—and it clearly was exciting for the likes of Darius—involved skulking inside houses full of people was someone you needed to keep at a distance. I've stolen in the past—usually food but sometimes money as well—and I wouldn't trust anyone who did it for sport, for the thrill of standing over you while you slept. For all his dashing reputation and the breathless way in which the newspapers recounted his exploits, it did not surprise me in the least that he had killed a man tonight.

I was, I reminded myself, unarmed. I didn't like guns, even when I was the one holding them. Especially then, in fact.

I too was masked, though inelegantly, a scarf of soft fabric wrapped around my head so that there was only a slit for my eyes. It was hot and uncomfortable, but essential. I had a job that paid well, which kept me out of the gangs and the factories that would be my

FIREBRAND

|| 11

only tolerable options if anyone guessed who I really was. That would be easier if anyone realized I was Lani, so my skin stayed covered.

I crossed the wire bridge, slid down the ridged tile, and launched myself across the alley, seventy feet above the cobbled ground, dropping one full story and hitting the fire escape with a bone-rattling jolt. Grasping the handrails, I swung down four steps at a time, listening to Darius's fine shoes on the steps below me. I was still three flights above him when he landed lightly on the elegant balcony on the front of the Victory Street Hotel. I dropped in time to see him swinging around the dividing walls between balconies, vanishing from sight at the fourth one.

He might just have hidden in the shadows, waiting for me to follow him, or he might have forced the window and slipped into the hotel room.

I didn't hesitate, leaping onto the first balcony, hanging for an instant like a vervet monkey in a marulla tree, then reaching for the next and the next with long, sinewy arms. I paused only a half second before scything my legs over the wall and into the

balcony where
he had disappeared, my left hand straying to the heavy-bladed kukri
I wore in a scabbard at my waist.

I didn't need it. Not yet, at least.

He had jimmied the door latch and slipped into a well-appointed
bedroom with wood paneling and heavy curtains of damask with
braided accents that matched the counterpane.

Fancy.

But then this was Victory Street, so you'd expect that.

I angled my head and peered into the gloom. The bed
was, so far
as I could see, unoccupied. I stood quite still on
the thick dark carpet,
breathing shallowly. Unless he was crouching behind
the bed or
hiding in the ensuite, he wasn't there. The door into
the hotel's hallway
was only thirty feet away, and I was wasting time.

I took four long strides and was halfway to the door when he hit

me, surging up from behind the bed like a crocodile bursting from the reeds, jaws agape. He caught me around the waist and dragged me down so that I landed hard on one shoulder and hit my head on a chest of drawers. For a moment the world went white, then black, then a dull throbbing red as I shook off the confusion and grasped at his throat.

He slid free, pausing only long enough to aim a kick squarely into my face before making for the hallway. I saw it coming and turned away from the worst of it, shrinking and twisting so that he connected with my already aching shoulder. He reached for the scarf about my head, but I had the presence of mind to bring the kukri slicing up through the air, its razor edge flashing. He snatched his hand away, swung another kick, which got more of my hip than my belly, and made for the door.

I rolled, groaning and angry, listening to the door snap shut behind him, then flexed the muscles of my neck and shoulder, touching the fabric around my head with fluttering fingers. It was still intact, as was I, but I felt rattled, scared. Darius's cat burglar suaveness was all gone, exposed for the veneer it was, and beneath it

there was ugliness
and cruelty and the love of having other people in
his power. I
wasn't surprised, but it gave me pause. I'd been ki
cked many times
before, and I always knew what was behind it, how m
uch force and
skill, how much real, venomous desire to hurt, crip
ple, or kill. His
effort had largely gone wide because it was dark an
d I knew how to
dodge, but the kick had been deliberate, cruel. If
I caught up with him
and he thought he was in real danger, he would kill
me without a second's
thought. I rolled to a crouch, sucked in a long, st
eadying breath,
and went after him.

The hallway was lit by the amber glow of shaded oil
lamps on side
tables, so that for all the opulence of the place,
the air tasted of acrid
smoke, and the darkness pooled around me as I ran.
Up ahead, the
corridor turned into an open area where a single ye
llowing bulb of
luxorite shone on intricate ceiling moldings and or
namental pilasters.

FIREBRAND

|| 13

There were stairs down, and I was aware of voices, lots of them, a sea of confused chatter spiked erratically with waves of laughter.

A party.

More Bar-Selehm elegance and, for me, more danger. I had no official position, no papers allowing me to break into the hotel rooms of the wealthy, nothing that would make my Lani presence among the cream of the city palatable. And in spite of all I had done for BarSelehm—for the very people who were sipping wine in the ballroom below—I felt the pressure of this more keenly than I had Darius's malevolent kick. Some blows were harder to roll with.

I sprang down the carpeted stairs, turning the corner into the noise. The hallway became a gallery running around the upper story of the ballroom so that guests might promenade around the festivities, waving their fans at their friends below. Darius was on the far side, moving effortlessly through the formally dressed clusters of startled people. He was still masked, and they knew him on sight, falling away, their mouths little Os of shock. One of the women fainted, or

pretended to. Another partygoer, wearing a dragoon's formal blues, took a step toward the masked man, but the pistol in Darius's hand swung round like an accusatory finger and the dragoon thought better of his heroism.

I barreled through the crowd, shoving mercilessly, not breaking stride. The party below had staggered to a halt, and the room was a sea of upturned faces watching us as we swept around the gallery toward another flight of stairs. As I neared the corner, I seized a silver platter from an elegant lady in teal and heaved it at him, so that it slid in a long and menacing arc over the heads of the crowd below and stung him on the shoulder. He turned, angry, and found me elbowing my way through the people as they blew away from him like screws of colored tissue, horrified and delighted by their proximity to the infamous cat burglar. And then his gun came up again and they were just horrified, flinging themselves to the ground.

He fired twice. The gilded plaster cherub curled round the

balustrade in front of me exploded, and the screaming started.

Somewhere a glass broke, and in all the shrieking, it wasn't absolutely clear that no one had been seriously hurt, but then someone

took a bad step, lost their balance, and went over the balustrade.

More screaming, and another shot. I took cover behind a stone pillar, and when I peered round, Darius had already reached the stairs and was gone.

I sprinted after him, knocking a middle-aged woman in layers of black gauzy stuff to the ground as I barged through. My kukri was still in my hand, and the partygoers were at least as spooked by the sweep of its broad, purposeful blade as by Darius's pistol, though it had the advantage of focusing their attention away from my face and onto my gloved hands. A waiter—the only black person in the room that I could see—stepped back from me, staring at the curved knife like it was red-hot. That gave me the opening I needed, and I dashed through to the stairs.

Darius had gone up. I gave chase, focusing on the sound of his expensive shoes. One flight, two, three, then the snap of a door and suddenly I was in a bare hall of parquet floors, di

m, hot, and dusty. A single oil lamp showed supply closets overflowing with bed linens and aprons on hooks. The hall ended in a steel ladder up to the roof, the panel closing with a metallic clang as I moved toward it.

He might be waiting, pistol reloaded and aimed. But he had chosen this building for a reason. Its roof gave onto Long Terrace, which ran all the way to the edge of Mahweni Old Town, from where he could reach any part of the northern riverbank or cross over into the warren of warehouses, sheds, and factories on the south side. He wouldn't be waiting. He was looking to get away.

So I scaled the ladder and heaved open the metal shutters as quietly as I could manage. I didn't want to catch him. I wanted to see where he went. It would be best if he thought he'd lost me. I slid out cautiously, dropped into a half crouch and scuttered to the end of the roof like a baboon. Darius was well away, taking leaping strides along

FIREBRAND

|| 15

the roof of the Long Terrace, and as he slowed to look back, I leaned behind one of the hotel's ornamental gargoyles out of sight. When next I peered round, he was moving again, but slower, secure in the knowledge that he was in the clear.

I waited another second before dropping to the Long Terrace roof, staying low, and sheathing my kukri. The terrace was one of the city's architectural jewels: a mile-long continuous row of elegant, three-story houses with servants' quarters below stairs. They were fashioned from a stone so pale it was almost white and each had the same black door, the same stone urn and bas-relief carving, the same slate roof. Enterprising home owners had lined the front lip of the roof with planters that, at this time of year, trailed fragrant vines of messara flowers. The whole terrace curved fractionally down toward the river like a lock of elegantly braided hair. For Darius it provided a direct route across several blocks of the city away from prying eyes.

The nights were warming as Bar-Selehm abandoned its token spring, and the pursuit had made me sweat. We had left the light of the Beacon behind, and I could barely keep track of

Darius in the
smoggy gloom, even with my long lens, which I drew
from my pocket
and unfolded. At the end of the terrace, he paused
to look back once
more, adjusting the tubular roll of documents he ha
d slung across
his back, but I had chosen a spot in the shadow of
a great urn sprouting
ferns and a dwarf fruit tree, and he saw nothing. S
atisfied, he
shinned down the angled corner blocks at the end of
the terrace and
emerged atop the triumphal arch that spanned Broad
Street, then descended
the steps halfway and sprang onto the landing of th
e Svengale
shrine, whose minaret marked the edge of Old Town.
I gave chase
and was navigating the slim walkway atop the arch w
hen he happened
to look up and see me.

I dropped to the thin ribbon of stone before he cou
ld get his pistol
sighted, and the shot thrummed overhead like a humm
ingbird. He
clattered up the steps that curled round the minare
t and flung himself
onto the sand-colored tile of the neighboring house
. He was

running flat out now, and I had no choice but to do the same. I jumped, snatched a handhold on the minaret, and tore after him, landing clumsily on the roof so that I was almost too late in my roll. Another shot, and one of the tiles shattered in a hail of amber grit that stung my eyes. I sprawled for cover, but Darius was off a gain, vaulting from roof to roof, scattering tile as he ran, so that they fell, popping and crackling into the street below. Somewhere behind us, an elderly black man emerged shouting, but I had no time for sympathy or apologies.

As the narrow street began to curl in on itself, Darius dropped to the rough cobbles and sprinted off into the labyrinth which was Old Town. The streets were barely wide enough for a cart to squeeze through, and at times I could touch the buildings on either side of the road at the same time. There was a pale gibbous moon glowing like a lamp in Bar-Selehm's perpetual smoky haze, but its light did not reach into the narrow ginnels running between the city's most ancient houses. Down here his footfalls echoed in the dark, which was the only reason I could keep up with him as he turned left, then right, then back, past the Ntenga butchers' row and

down to the waterfront,
where I lost him.

The river wasn't as high as it had been a couple of weeks before, but it filled the night with a constant susurrations like wind in tall grass. As the carefully maintained cobbles gave way to the weedy gravel around the riverside boatyards and mooring quays, any footfalls were lost in the steady background hiss of the river Kalihm. I clambered down the brick embankment that lined the riverbank and revolved on the spot, biting back curses as I tried, eyes half shut, to catch the sound of movement.

There. It may have been no more than a half brick turned by a stray foot, but I heard it, down near the shingle shore only fifty yards away. It came from the narrow alley between a pair of rickety boathouses that straddled a concrete pier. I made for the sound, opting for stealth rather than speed, one hand on the horn butt of my kukri,

FIREBRAND

|| 17

picking my way over the rounded stones, my back to the city. Even here, in the heart of Bar-Selehm, when you faced the river, you stepped back three hundred years, and there was only water and reeds and the giant herons that stalked among them.

I heard the noise again, different this time, more distinct, but in this narrow wedge of space between the boathouses, almost no light struggled through. The river itself was paler, reflecting the smudge of moon in the night sky and touched with the eerie phosphorescence of glowing things that lived in its depths, but I could see nothing between me and it.

Or almost nothing.

As I crept down the pebbled slope, I saw—or felt—a shape in front of me as it shifted. Something like a large man crouching no more than a few feet ahead. A very large man. I slid the kukri from its sheath, and in that second, the shape moved, black against the waters of the Kalihm. It turned, lengthening improbably as it presented its flank to me. It was, I realized with a pang of terror, no man. It was as big as a cart, and as it continued its slow rotation to face me, a

shaft of light splashed across its massive, glistening head. I felt my heart catch.

The hippo rushed at me then, its face splitting open impossibly, eyes rolling back as it bared its immense tusks and bellowed.

