

FIREBOY

by Dean Whitlock

PROLOGUE

A sea-born fog sat heavily on the slate roofs of Dungow's crowded buildings and painted a slick sheen onto its brick and stone walls. The canals between the city's many islands were dark, greasy tunnels lined with damp. It was near noon, but dawn had barely managed to force its way beneath the ropes of mist. Every boat crept along, as though the air were thicker than usual. Fireboy steered the *Water Sprite* carefully into an intersection, alert for crossing traffic. The deep bleat of a big steam whistle revealed an oncoming barge, hogging three-quarters of the canal's width.

"Overstuffed scow," Fireboy muttered. "Stay on the Main Canal, where you belong."

He sounded two sweet toots from the *Sprite's* whistle and threaded the narrow steam launch between the barge and the dripping stone facades of the warehouses fronting the canal. Just ahead, a narrow landing jutted from a doorway. There was barely enough room between it and the barge for even the *Sprite* to slip through. Fireboy sighed, and throttled back to a crawl. He had two messages to deliver and a cargo to pick up on the far side of the city, and it was going to take forever in this fog.

Then a man came through the doorway and hailed him. "You! Boatman! Take me to Seamans Plaza. Quickly!"

Luck of the River! Fireboy thought. A merchant in a hurry could afford a healthy tip, and this one seemed rich enough, in a heavy cape and a broad brocade hat. Even the man's leather satchel was decorated with tooling and brass. The merchant stepped on board and sat across from Fireboy, under the canopy.

"Go on!" he ordered. "You can fit through there!"

"Yes, sir," Fireboy said. "Quickly it is."

He gave the whistle another toot and opened the throttle a quarter turn. The *Sprite* slipped quietly from the landing. As they passed the arse end of the barge, Fireboy opened the throttle another half turn, and a white lip began to purl at the *Sprite's* graceful bow. Her little single cylinder chuffed a merry quick-time march. With one hand on the wheel, he pulled open the firebox door, ran a rake over the embers, laid in a neat shovelful of pea coal, and clanked the door shut, all in moments. The burst of red heat burned a brief hole in the fog.

Then mist wraithed back around them. Water dripped from his hair and his nose and

the rim of the *Sprite*'s canopy. And the merchant's fat hat and every other thing except the firebox and boiler. There the fog steamed off as soon as it touched hot metal, a perpetual hiss so faint it was almost hidden by the lisp of their wake.

At the next junction, Fireboy swung sharply into an even tighter canal. A sudden shout made him swerve wide, just missing a rowboat with paint so weathered it was a perfect match to the mist. And then a quick swerve back to avoid another launch swinging in from the other direction. And then – Blast it! – the arse end of another barge loomed out of the gloom right in front of them, creeping along at half their speed.

Fireboy swung the *Sprite* to the outside of the barge. There was little room for caution here; the *Sprite*'s engine was an old design – there was no way to reverse. And his passenger was in a hurry. Fireboy thanked the River there were no landings on this stretch of canal and peered into the mist for any glimpse of an on-coming boat. Then he opened the throttle and raced for the front of the barge. The *Sprite*'s rails kissed the stones on one side and the barge's planking on the other.

“Easy now,” the merchant muttered. His hands were clenched on his satchel.

A sharp hoot sounded dead ahead; a dark hull took form in the mist. The watercoach was coming at them. Fireboy could make out the boatman's white face. The horn hooted again. And again.

“Stop!” the Merchant cried. “Back up! Get over!”

Too late for that, Fireboy thought. “Don't worry, sir, we'll make it!”

He opened the throttle wide. The *Sprite*'s engine skipped once, then chugged like a racer's heart. The bow wave washed up the the walls on both sides and came back at them. Fireboy played the wheel firmly, running the *Sprite* straight down the rapidly shortening lane that ended at the advancing coach. Its boatman yelled. The passengers yelled. The boatmen on the barge yelled. The merchant could only gasp.

The *Water Sprite* rode the lip of the barge's wake through the gap between the two bows. Curses rang in his ears. Two more turns and they were in the Main Canal, busy with boats of every size and description, but with plenty of room to feel the wind of your own passage.

“Almost there, sir,” he said.

The merchant only grunted. His fingers were still white.

Fireboy wove the *Sprite* between a punt and a wherry, backed off the throttle, and slid her to a gentle stop against the curved stone lip of the landing below Seamans Plaza.

“Here we are, in next to no time,” he announced.

“And lucky to be alive,” the merchant snapped. “I said quick, not crazy!” He squashed a coin into Fireboy's outstretched hand, clambered out, and stalked up the stairs to the plaza.

Fireboy stared at the fare: a single copper deed. He looked up, ready to demand the full fare, but the man had already disappeared.

“Blasted tight-fist!” Fireboy yelled. The words were lost in the fog.

Typical rich Dunsgow money-grubber, he thought. Tell you one thing and then claim the other. Any excuse to shortchange you. Should have known better than to hurry for the likes of him. I could have hurt someone in this fog. Could have lost *Sprite*.

“Sorry, girl.” He patted her cockpit coaming.

What the city needs is a weather mage, Fireboy thought, as he steered back into the traffic. A weather mage could clear out this fog, and all the smoke and stench, too. Turn it to rain, bring on a wind, and blow it away. The Council should hire one down from the higher reaches. It would be good for business.

But the Council was leery of mages these days. Everyone was, after the trouble they’d had with the Great Mage and the old Duke. There’d been only the one mage then. The others had all been chased out or locked up or scared into hiding. And that wasn’t good, everyone agreed. They longed for the good old days – until the good old days came back, and then everyone wasn’t so sure. Which mages could you trust? Could you trust any mage at all?

Fireboy knew you could, because he knew mages he trusted, including a weather mage. But that just made people more worried. After all, weather wasn’t just fog and rain and sunny days. It was hail and sleet, gale winds and storms, thunder and lightning, and—

A commotion broke into his thoughts: hubbub, angry shouts, a scream. A rotten apple flew out of the mist and splatted against the boiler with a dull, hissing *schtunk!*

“Hoy!” Fireboy yelled. “Watch your aim!”

The reply was another scream and a rain of fruit that pocked the water. Fireboy throttled back and turned the *Sprite* in a tight circle, scanning the fog that draped the edge of the canal. He could just make out a few figures on the wide stone curbing. They were struggling, holding someone, while others he couldn’t see threw fruit and stones; one cracked against the coaming.

“*Hoy!*” he yelled again. “Stop that!” He steered straight toward the struggle, sounding a long, shrill blast on the whistle. “Let him go!” He sounded the whistle in short, sharp barks, crying, “Guarda! Guarda!”

One of the figures shook a fist at him. There were more angry yells. Then they threw their captive off the curbing.

The person fell, kicking and shrieking, and Fireboy had just enough time to register the skirts and the flailing hair before she hit the water flat on her back, splashing him thoroughly with filthy brown water. He coughed and sputtered and just managed to miss ramming the stone wall of the canal. Wiping his eyes, he brought the *Sprite* around in a tight circle, throttled all the way back, and hurried to the bow, grabbing the boat hook from its rack up under the canopy fringe. The woman had come to the surface, but her skirts were dragging her back. She grabbed at the water as if it had handholds..

Fireboy held out the boat hook right by her hands, but her eyes had gone under. He thrust the hook deeper and managed to snag her under the arm. She grabbed it blindly and almost pulled him in. Fireboy hooked his knees against the bench, leaned out over the coaming, and heaved back. The woman came up, gasping, almost drowned in her own hair.

“Grab my hand!” Fireboy yelled. He braced the boat hook under his arm and reached out as far as he dared. She opened her eyes and lunged for his hand, nearly dragging him in again. But he managed to stay in the boat and haul her high enough to get a grip on the rub rail. And then it was all she could do to hang on. There was nothing for it: Fireboy reached down, grabbed two heavy handfuls of skirt, and manhandled her out of the water, over the coaming, and into a disheveled heap on the bench. Water drained out of her sodden skirts into the bilge.

Fireboy was thoroughly drenched and winded himself, but they were drifting on the Main Canal, with boats passing to right and left in the fog. He stumbled back to the wheel, opened the throttle a notch, and steered carefully away from the scene of the struggle. Two men were still on the curbing, shouting insults and throwing apples.

Must have had a whole bushel, he thought. What a waste. Blasted bullies.

“You all right?” he asked his unexpected passenger.

The woman smiled grimly through her tangle of wet hair.

“Better than I would’ve been.” She coughed and spat. “Feh! Tastes as bad as it smells.”

She wrung out her long hair with both hands and pushed it to the sides of her face.

“What was that all about?” Fireboy asked.

She started wringing out her skirts. “The usual; a customer didn’t like hearing the truth.”

“You’re a truth-sayer?” Fireboy was surprised. It wasn’t a common talent.

“Ha! That sort of customer would never want a truth-sayer.” She pulled a comb from somewhere in her voluminous skirts and began to untangle her hair. It was thick and thatchy, a dirty blond made dirtier by the dunking. “I’m a seer, lad. That’s my talent: augury, scrying, reading dreams and fortunes from the flowers in your eyes. Most people can take what I tell them. Some few get angry when it doesn’t come out precisely what they expected. And some few of those get mean. Like it’s my fault the future doesn’t sit still and wait for you to get there.”

Fireboy considered that thought. “What do you—?”

“I mean,” she said, “that the future changes. From moment to moment. Every action, every choice you make affects the next one. Sometimes it doesn’t matter; every choice goes the same way. Most times it does matter. Then the future that was isn’t, and the future that wasn’t now is.” She grabbed a handful of damp skirt and squeezed out another trickle. “It’s like trying to nail down water.”

Fireboy shook his head. “Who’d want to hear the future if it always changes? D’you tell people that?”

She shrugged and went back to work on her hair. “Not in so many words, but, yes, I warn them, bad or good. ‘Watch your step,’ I say. Or, ‘Change your ways’ – you can be sure no one likes to hear that – or ‘Is this what you really want? Because if it is, you need to keep doing just exactly what you’re doing.’ And you know what, my good little boatman? They don’t listen. They just hear what they want to hear. And when that doesn’t happen, *pow!* It’s all my fault.”

“Then why do you keep doing it, telling futures? Why don’t you do something else?”

She stopped combing and looked at him. She looked at the *Water Sprite*: engine, boiler, canopy, bow, and stern. Then back at him. She narrowed her eyes and peered deep into his. Fireboy felt the hairs prickle on the back of his neck.

“Why do you keep running this boat?” she asked.

“Well, I . . .” Fireboy swallowed and set his jaw, suddenly angry that he’d let her put him so on edge. “It’s what I do. I mean, it’s what I do *best*. Don’t want do anything else.”

“It’s your talent?”

“Right! My talent. What I’m meant to do.” He punctuated the statement by opening the firebox door, raking the embers, laying on coal.

“So you do it,” the woman said. “And so with me. Seeing’s what I’m meant to do.”

“Maybe you should go somewhere else,” Fireboy said. “Where people aren’t so angry about mages.”

“Is there such a place?” she asked.

“Sure is!” Fireboy replied. “The middle reach. On the River Slow.”

She leaned back and looked at him as if he had just sprouted a second head. “You’re saying I should go upriver? Up the cliff?”

“Why not, if it’ll keep you from getting beat up and thrown in a canal? Why stay in Dunsgow? Dirty city, dirty water, tall buildings all closed in, narrow lanes, crowded canals, yellow air, and too many people trying to breathe the same lungful. And some of them trying to drown you. Why stay? Maybe your future’s somewhere else entirely.”

Fireboy grinned. He had her with that one, for sure. Or so he thought.

She smiled back. “You have a point there, boatman. I will think on it. But now I need to get home to dry off.” She gave him an address, and Fireboy flashed her a grin, sounded his whistle, and opened the throttle.

In a few minutes, he brought the *Sprite* gently against the landing at the base of a narrow set of steps leading up to an alley on the edge of the Old Town.

“Here you are,” he announced.

“So I am,” the seer replied, “but before I go, I owe you something.”

Fireboy started to protest, but she shushed him with a stern look. “I won’t be in your

debt, good boatman. Your talent saved my life. You shall have what I can give of mine.”

Fireboy wasn't sure he wanted to hear his future, even if it was bound to change the very next time he turned left instead of right.

The seer didn't give him a chance to say so. “Look at me,” she said. “Look right in this eye.” She held the tip of her finger below her left eye, and Fireboy couldn't help but look. And once he looked, he couldn't possibly look away.

She pulled a small brass-rimmed lens from her encompassing skirts and held it between their eyes. Hers was blue, deep blue, with rays of green and gold radiating from the iris. “Good,” she said. “Look right in. See where it takes you. And while you're there, think about what you want most in the world.”

Fireboy blinked. That was easy: to run his boat. To be best on the river. Only he wasn't on the river, he was in a canal in a big, dirty city. His piece of river was up on the middle reach. Where he'd be now if he hadn't stolen a boat and run away. A baron's boat at that. So now he was stuck here, away from his river. His home. His father and brother. He saw their faces, and his mother's, too, as best as he could remember. She'd been sent away years ago, to another river, in bond to another baron. She was stuck, too, unless he could pay off her bond.

Fireboy's hand went up on its own accord, to touch the pouch tucked away in a hidden slit let into the side of his topshirt. Twenty-five gold coins it held, twenty-five talents. A good start, but still not enough to pay off a bond. And how fast would it grow, one deed at a time?

“*Aie*,” the seer murmured. “Such a tangle of weeds.” She lowered the lens and sat back.

“What?” Fireboy asked. “What did you see?”

“An overgrown garden, boatman. A rich bed of perchance and maybe.”

“What do you mean?”

She gave him a wan smile. “Blots, flecks, swirls, rays, petals. I read the colors in the flowers that circle the dot in your eye.”

“My eyes are black,” he said.

She chuckled. “You're a grayfolk. Your eyes are gray, shades and shades of it, and silver, too, and indigo, charcoal, and even grains of gold. And here's what they showed me: fire, coal, clouds. Darkness, a deep dark. The glint of metal; tin? Mean anything to you? No? No matter now, there's more: iron, definitely. A shovel, and also a knife. Three of them. A boat, not this one. A ladder, tall, with landings like stairs, three of them. A knot. A face like . . . like none I've ever seen. And water, rune water: *Wu*, flowing, running, falling, rivers of it: blue, sliver, gray, black, all the shades that water can be. Then fire again, lots of it. That's what your eye showed me.”

She stopped talking. She was staring at Fireboy, but not seeing. Not him at least. He felt the back of his neck tingle again.

“But what does it mean?” he asked.

She blinked several times, and her gaze finally settled back on his face. “You’re going to take a long journey. You’re going to find new friends and new enemies, and it won’t be easy to tell them apart. Fire and water; never an easy mix.”

“A journey,” Fireboy echoed. “Upriver? Is that the ladders and the water?”

“What do you think?”

“What else could it mean?”

She gave him a guarded look. “Ebb and flow. The current of the world. Wash clean and wash away. Drink and drown. Life and death. Only fire is more fickle in meaning.”

“Death?”

“You make your choice, you take your chances.”

“What if I don’t take this journey?”

“That’s a choice, too, but to which end?” She shrugged.

Fireboy frowned. “That’s not very clear.”

“I usually dress it up with a good story, but I thought you deserved the bare truth.”

Fireboy thanked her, and she thanked him back. He waited while she climbed the stairs, to make sure no one was waiting to jump her at the top. Then he put the engine in gear and steered the *Sprite* down the canal toward his next destination.

Today’s destination, he thought. That’s what’s important: get the job done and go onto the next.

He touched the hidden pouch again.

One thing for sure, I won’t be taking long journeys anytime soon. I can see that much of the future.