

Chapter Fourteen

Though it seemed like forever, he fell for only a few more seconds before emerging from the narrow shaft. A moment of freefalling then his feet connected with water. The momentum of his fall had him submerged in the blink of an eye. No sooner had his head gone under, than the fireball exploded upon the surface, an intensely bright blast that lasted for only a second.

The water was deep, about nine feet with a mild current that pulled at him. Kicking hard from the bottom, he broke the surface and took in a ragged breath. The air was oppressively hot and smelled of charred human waste, the stench was almost overpowering. He must be in an underground waterway that took the outfall from the jakes to the lake.

In the darkness of the sewer, he began to detect a very faint light coming from downstream, around a bend in the channel. Where there's light, there may be a way out. Swimming with the current, he headed for it. With any luck, those in the castle above would believe the fireball had killed him. But he had long since learned that one couldn't trust to such things. A man tended to make his own luck. He needed to get out of there before anyone thought to come see if he was in fact dead.

As he swam with the current he grew ever more certain the light he was seeing was in fact sunlight. Drawing closer to where the water once again emerged to the outside world, his hopes of a quick escape were soon to be dashed. For just before where the waterway emerged into the open, a wall of thick iron bars set six inches apart blocked the entrance. Bart ceased swimming as soon as he saw them. Instead, he allowed the current to carry him forward as he sought another way out.

Both sides of the waterway were stone and rose sheer all the way to the ceiling. The ceiling had been left rough when they hewed the

tunnel, but it was solid without any openings through which he might escape.

The current carried him to the bars where he took hold of them and contemplated his situation. He tried moving the bars through brute strength, but he couldn't budge them. Then he checked beneath the water to see if there was an opening. After several dives beneath the surface, he concluded that there was no way out at this end. Looking back at the dark interior from which the water issued, he realized that he was trapped.

It had been a couple hours since their return from the wine merchant's shop. They had spent the time gathered in Riyan's room going over what they knew, and what they hoped Bart would discover.

Chyfe had come up with the suggestion that maybe they should hunt for ruins similar to those found on the island near Catha. "Until we gain information that points in a certain direction," he concluded, "I don't know what else we can do?"

"Soth and I could make discreet inquiries about town," offered Seth.

Riyan nodded. "If anyone was to do it, it would have to be you two," he said.

"I haven't seen anything that could remotely be considered old enough to date from the time of the King," Kevik stated.

"Neither have I," agreed Chad. "Maybe we could ride around the countryside and look?"

Riyan shook his head. "We are supposed to be agents for a wine merchant," he argued. "It would hardly be credible for us to do such things."

"It was just a thought," replied Chad.

"You know..." Kevik began then came to a stop as something tugged at his mind. Focusing inward, he heard Bart's voice shout, *Kevik!*

Bart? he replied. Absentmindedly, he rubbed the ring through which Bart's thoughts were being sent.

I'm in serious trouble, Bart told him.

What happened? asked Kevik.

Riyan noticed the look that came over Kevik. "Kevik?" he asked. When there was no response, he said to the others, "Bart must be speaking with him."

“Trouble do you think?” asked Chyfe.

Riyan nodded. “Probably. We’ll know soon enough,” he told the others. The room grew quiet as everyone turned toward Kevik.

I was discovered, Bart explained. *I don’t know how, but they knew I was there*. He then sent a vision of the magic user and the static discharging purple orb.

Where are you? asked Kevik.

Beneath the castle, replied Bart. *I’m in an underground waterway that empties into the lake*.

Can you make it back to the inn? Kevik asked.

I don’t know, he replied. *The mouth of the waterway is blocked with iron bars*.

I’m with the others, Kevik told him. *Give me a minute to tell them what’s happening*.

Alright, Bart said. *But hurry. You guys may be in danger too*.

Kevik’s eyes came back into focus and then he related to the others what Bart had told him.

“Is he alright?” Riyan asked.

“I believe so,” Kevik replied.

Chyfe went to the window and looked out to the street below. When he didn’t see any guards approaching, he turned back to the others and said, “If he was discovered, they may have already connected him to us.”

“Yeah,” agreed Chad. “How many people have you seen from Byrdlon around here?”

“Exactly,” stated Chyfe.

“Can you do anything to get past the iron bars?” Soth asked Kevik.

Kevik shook his head. “No,” he replied. Then he looked to Riyan. “What should I tell him?”

“Maybe he could work his way to the other end of the waterway?” suggested Chyfe. When the others looked to him he shrugged and said, “It has to come from somewhere.”

“I’ll ask,” said Kevik. Focusing on Bart once again, he mentally said, *Bart?*

Not now! came the reply. He had a brief vision of water, iron bars, and figures standing on the other side looking in before the connection was broken.

“I think they found him,” he told the others.

Bart had moved back into the channel when he first realized people were approaching the barred mouth of the waterway. Making his way against the current wasn't difficult as it moved along at a leisurely pace. By the time the guards reached the bars, he was twenty feet away and all but his eyes and the top of his head were submerged beneath the surface. His fingers held onto a small crack in the wall to prevent the current from carrying him forward.

Four guards stood at the bars as they searched the dark interior of the waterway. "Where is he?" one asked.

A large guard who appeared to be the leader of the group replied, "If he was dead, the current should have brought him here by now."

"But wouldn't have Geffen's spell obliterated him?" another asked.

"Perhaps," the leader stated. "But there would still be bits and pieces." He stared into the dark tunnel another moment then turned to one of his men. "Tell the captain the body wasn't at this end," he said. "He may still be alive."

"Yes sir," the guard replied then began moving away.

The leader then turned to his other two men. "You two stay here and keep watch." The two guards nodded and then the leader turned about and left.

Bart remained against the wall, the cold of the water beginning to seep into his body. He watched as the leader left and the two guards remained by the bars looking in. He was certain they couldn't penetrate the darkness to where he hid.

Glancing back down the dark waterway, he realized that if he was to get out of this alive, it would have to be that way. Only problem was moving against the current. The depth of the water prevented him from being able to touch the bottom of the channel while still keeping his head above water. And should he try to swim, the guards at the bars were sure to hear the resulting noise. His only remaining option was to use the cracks in the wall as handholds and pull himself along.

Crack by crack, and there weren't many, he began moving further away from the bars and the guards stationed there. Moving as quickly as he could, he gradually put distance between himself and the bars.

It was dark in the waterway and the light coming in from the end grew fainter the further he went. Once he figured to be far enough away

that any splashing noise from swimming was unlikely to be noticed, he let go of the cracks and began swimming with all his might.

He had never liked swimming, though his father had forced it upon him. '*The more skills a thief has at his command,*' his father had always said, '*the better thief he's going to be.*' More than once the skills Bart had thought of as useless for a thief to know had proven useful, even saved his life.

As the light from the end of the waterway dimmed, the darkness became ever more absolute. At one point he got to thinking that he may very well be swimming past a way out. Should there be stairs or rungs leading up, he'd never be able to see them. He needed a source of light. Then it hit him. *Stupid!* he cursed. Moving closer to the wall, he found a crack that he could use to hold him steady against the current. Once he had a secure hold, he used his other hand to remove his waterlogged pack.

Even before he opened it, he could see a faint blue glow emanating from within. The Cloak was still glowing blue from the spell of the magic user. He pulled it out and then returned the pack to his back.

The glow coming from the Cloak wasn't bright, but it did give off just enough light for him to make out the sides of the channel. Smiling to himself, he wrapped the Cloak around his left arm then tied the sleeves together to secure it.

Holding to the crack, Bart scanned the walls and ceiling as far as the glow extended but failed to find a way out. Pushing away from the wall, he continued swimming upstream. From past experiences with Kevik, he knew that all spells eventually ended. He prayed that he would find a way out before the glow vanished.

Moving against the current, coupled with the added weight of his waterlogged clothes and pack, his strength started to wane. But resting wasn't an option. He didn't know how long it would take for the guard to find his captain and report that Bart was still down there, but it couldn't be much longer. Once they knew his body hadn't been found at the bars, the hunt would be on again, if it wasn't already.

One stroke at a time, he moved further up the waterway. The channel through which the water flowed moved in a serpentine manner, most likely in order for it to service as many jakes as possible. Bart glanced backward and saw that the channel had already curved sufficiently to block the light coming from outside, only an almost

imperceptible brightening of the tunnel down there remained. If the glow from the Cloak disappeared, he would be in almost total darkness.

The walls continued to be sheer and without a way out. The smell of char came to him after a few more minutes of swimming. That's when he noticed the walls of the channel were blackened, scoring caused by the fireball's explosion. Looking up, he could barely see the opening of the jakes through which he fell.

For a fraction of a second, the thought of trying to climb back out that way crossed his mind. But then he remembered how slick the sides of the jakes were. If he hadn't been able to halt his fall, what chance had he of climbing up through there?

Squeak.

The sound of a rat broke the silence. Bart glanced around and saw a narrow ledge two feet above the water line on the other side. He hadn't noticed it before as from his point of view and in the dim glow of the Cloak, it appeared to be just part of the wall. But a lone rat was making its way along it. The rat came to a stop, glanced in his direction and squeaked again before continuing on its way.

The rat had to have entered from somewhere. With renewed hope, Bart crossed the waterway and grabbed hold of the ledge. It was only two inches wide, he had hoped for more. His sudden movement towards the ledge upon which the rat scurried frightened it. Squealing once again, it quickened its pace as it moved away from Bart.

"No you don't," Bart said as he hurried after it.

Other pairs of glowing eyes were soon apparent as the rat reached an area with more of its kind.

"I hate being down here," a voice said.

Bart froze where he was and looked upstream to a light that was advancing quickly. Rats forgotten, he moved against the wall and lowered himself into the water until only his head broke the surface. He watched the approaching light and was soon to realize the light was coming from a lantern held by one of four guards on a small boat. He removed the glowing Cloak from around his arm and quickly put it in his pack.

The guard holding the lantern stood at the fore of a small boat. Another stood next to him while the remaining two rowed. "Can you believe anyone escaping through a jakes?" the guard next to the one holding the lantern said with a laugh.

"I think I'd rather die than do that," lantern holder replied.

"We should be getting close," the other stated.

With the pack once more across his back, Bart returned his attention to the oncoming boat as he grew still in the water.

"This is a waste of time," lantern holder stated. "Never heard of anyone living through one of Geffen's fireballs."

"I know what you mean," agreed the other. "Once, I saw him take down a charging bull that had gone mad. All that was left were ashes."

"Still, the body wasn't found at the outflow," lantern holder asserted.

Bart held his position as the boat went past. When they drew closer, he took a deep breath and submerged his head completely so as not to leave any chance of being seen. The boat passed not four feet from where he was hiding. Through the water, he watched as the light came abreast of him then continued past. Once it had moved sufficiently downstream, he brought his head slowly back out of the water.

"Told you so," the guard was saying.

The boat came to a stop where the fireball had detonated. They were taking a look at the charred walls of the waterway. "No way he lived through that," one of the rowers commented.

"We better still check all the way to the end," lantern holder told the others. "With any luck we'll find something to take back and show the captain."

Bart reached up to the ledge once again to steady himself. His fingers had begun to grow stiff and sore from where he had been holding on to a very narrow crack in the wall below the waterline to prevent being carried away.

Squeak!

His fingers had encountered a furry body that squealed and scurried down the ledge. Glancing back to the boat, he saw the guards hadn't paid any attention to the noise of the rodent, and had continued on their way. Bart resumed his journey to find a way out.

He was able to see by the light from the guard's lantern until they passed around one of the numerous curves in the waterway and disappeared. After that he again pulled forth the Cloak from his pack and used its light to find the way.

Once the Cloak was again secured around his arm, he followed the ledge upon which the rats traveled. The ledge came to a small opening,

one much too small for him to pass. Inside the opening, the glow of the Cloak was being reflected off of many small pairs of eyes. With his hopes at escaping through that avenue dashed, Bart continued on.

The ledge extended for another four feet past the rat filled opening before coming to an end. His only hope now was to find the way the guards had used to enter and get out before they returned. Pushing away from the wall, he began swimming once more. Putting everything he had into it, he moved quickly through the waterway.

After only a few minutes of swimming, he heard voices coming from up ahead. He slowed his progress dramatically and slowly inched his way forward. Just up ahead was another sharp turn of the waterway. As he continued forward, the voices grew louder.

“...all the excitement,” a female voice was saying.

“The whole castle is being turned upside down to find the intruder’s accomplices,” said a male voice.

Out of the darkness the voices came. Bart returned the Cloak to his pack in order to conceal the glow. As soon as the pack was closed, he was plunged into absolute darkness.

“I’m glad we could have this time together,” the woman said.

“I’ll be leaving with the others in a couple weeks,” the man said.

“Do you have to go?” asked the woman.

“Yes my love,” he replied. “When he leaves, I must go with him.”

“But...” began the woman.

“Shhh,” the man said. “At least we have now.”

Bart still couldn’t see anyone around. When the talking stopped and the sound of kissing commenced, he knew that whoever the couple were, they had nothing to do with the search for him. Still, caution was ever a hallmark of a good thief and so he left the Cloak in his pack and continued forward in the dark.

The sound of the couple steadily grew louder, then it leveled off for a moment. Bart moved along slowly as he tried to ascertain where they were. Then, he heard them beginning to talk once more and the sound was now coming from behind him. That’s when he realized their voices were coming down one of the jakes-shafts. They must have rendezvoused in one of the jakes above.

Relieved that they weren’t down here with him, Bart opened his pack to retrieve his Cloak. Only, the spell which had caused it to glow had run its course. The Cloak no longer glowed. Closing the pack once

again, he slung it across his back and continued swimming down the river. He was disappointed that he no longer had the light with which to see, but at the same time, was glad. Should the situation warrant it, he could now use the Cloak without fear of being betrayed by the glow.

He kept to the right wall and felt along its length as he sought a way out. It was slower than all out swimming, but at the same time he didn't want to miss a possible exit.

Foot by foot he continued. In the back of his mind was the knowledge that at any time the four guards who had passed him earlier would be returning. He needed to find the way out and fast.

It was during a short pause as he gave his arms a brief break that he noticed the faintest freshening of the air. He had grown so used to the smell of the place that the influx of fresh air was made all the more noticeable. As he tried to determine its source, he detected a faint breeze.

Yes! he silently exclaimed. Where there was a breeze, there was a way out! It seemed to be coming from above him. That subdued his elation somewhat. The breeze could very well be coming down one of the jakes-shafts. But then, it wouldn't be fresh now would it? If only he had some light so he could be sure.

Raising his hand high, he tried to determine exactly where the breeze was originating from. A moment later he concluded that it was coming down the side of the wall above him. The opening through which it was blowing must be on this side of the waterway. He quickly made the decision that he had to discover if it was a possible way out. Reaching his hand up the wall as far as he could, he failed to encounter any opening that could be the source of the breeze. Wherever it was, it was too far above his head to effectively reach. He quickly realized he'd have to climb to reach it.

From the time he'd spent moving along the waterway, he knew the walls were riddled with cracks both large and small. And the wall before him was no exception. Moving his hand along the wall's surface, he encountered several cracks which would suffice. Deciding to go for it, he glanced back down the waterway in the direction from which the guards would be returning. Their lantern's light was not visible. With any luck they'll not return any time soon.

Reaching out, he took hold of the first crack and then moved the toe of his boot into another. Pulling his upper torso out of the water, he

found another toehold for his other foot. Then he reached up and found another crack, pulling himself still further from the water.

The breeze was more discernible now, a good indication it wasn't too far above him. Once he had a good firm handhold, he would move one of his feet to find a secure toehold. Step by step, he inched his way up the wall.

Then all of a sudden, his hand touched the rocky ceiling above him. The breeze was blowing swifter now, and a moment's search found its source, a jagged hole in the ceiling roughly two feet by three. It was two feet out from the wall and wide enough for him to pass through, but just barely.

While he held himself onto the wall with one hand, he felt around the inner sides of the opening with the other. There was water dripping through and in places he encountered patches of algae. Despite the slickness of the algae, the interior was uneven enough to allow him to attain a secure handhold and pull himself into it. He glanced back toward where the guards had gone and could now see a dim light being reflected off the walls of the channel. They were returning.

He had no way of knowing if the hole would continue to be large enough for him to pass. But as the guard's light steadily drew closer, he didn't have many other options. Deciding to take the chance, he reached out to the opening and found a good handhold. Trusting that it would hold, he quickly transferred his other hand to the handhold the first one held.

The transfer of weight caused his feet to lose their grip with the wall, and just as his second hand grasped the opening, his feet fell away from the wall and swung freely below him. Supported only by his arms, he held there for a moment before reaching for another handhold. While he held on with his right hand, he let go with his left and quickly hunted the sides of the cavity for another.

Finally finding one a foot higher than the other, he grasped it and made sure it would hold before reaching for a third. Down below, the water flowed along uncaring about his plight, and the light from the approaching guards was growing brighter by the second. He still couldn't actually see the boat as it was still hidden by a curve in the waterway. But by the brightness being reflected off the walls, it couldn't be too far away.

Once he had a secure hold with his left hand, he pulled himself up half a foot then held there as his right hand reached up to find another handhold. When he had one, he started pulling himself up further and...

Crack!

...the rock beneath his right hand suddenly gave out with a crack as a chunk fell away. As the weight of his body was suddenly and unexpectedly placed on his left hand, he almost lost his grip. By a narrow margin he was able to retain his grip long enough for his right hand to again find a purchase. A second later, a loud splash echoed in the waterway as the chunk of rock hit the water below.

"Damn!" Bart cursed. A quick glance back down the waterway couldn't reveal if the guards had heard or not. Once his shaking nerves quieted, he resumed pulling himself up into the crevice.

The air blowing past him produced shivers as it cooled his wet clothes. Handhold by handhold, he crept his way further into the recess until his feet passed through the opening and were able to take some of the pressure off his aching arms. Once his feet were securely in place, he relaxed his arms as much as he dared to give them a break.

Below, the waterway was growing brighter as the guards came ever closer. Bart held still as the voices of the guards began to be heard. Looking through the opening below, he saw the prow of the boat appear. His heart began to race as he realized that one look up by any of them and it was over. But fortune was with him. So engrossed were they in their conversation about the virtue of a certain chambermaid, that none bothered looking up.

He watched the boat pass as two of the guards rowed against the current. Before the boat had completely passed by, he took advantage of the guard's light to inspect the upper recesses of the crevice. It looked as if it continued upward for some distance. Then the light was gone when the boat moved beyond the mouth of the opening.

Bart waited for a minute or two to give his arms a break. Then when he was ready, he reached up for another handhold and continued his climb.