

CHAPTER 26 – SEWER SURFIN’ II

Unsurprisingly, flowing sewer waters lit on fire didn’t smell any less rank or foul.

If not for the choking smell, the patches of burning water, and the fact that Luke was being chased by two psychopathic assassins on a tide of decaying—and apparently inflammable—water, with a wound in his calf, he might have enjoyed himself.

The spillway sharply tilted down and Luke tipped over with it. Another arrow streaked over his shoulder just as he dropped in. That probably saved him from taking an arrow in the back.

Luke had only surfed a few times with Emma. Back then, it had been under the steely-eyed gaze of an experienced instructor. He had a wetsuit on as well as that little bungee cord to keep you tethered to the board.

Oh, and the board wasn’t a piece of age-hardened driftwood.

If Emma could see him now, she’d be impressed. Impressed and horrified, but impressed all the same.

He rose with a grunt of pain from the stub of an arrow in his calf. He managed to steer around a pile of floating barrels that were burning merrily as they flowed alongside him.

Arrows continued to streak past him, but he had distance on his side. Or so he thought.

Large chunks of debris were flowing down all around him. Chunks of fences, large piles of barrels, crates, and who knows what else were streaming past. Something deeper within the sluice gates must have been released after those chains vanished into the ceiling.

An old, iron-banded treasure chest floated by. Miserably, Luke realized it was just out of reach. It even had a nameplate [Simple Iron Treasure Chest] too.

Luke quickly reassessed his feelings on the matter when the treasure chest bumped into a barrel stuffed full of something inadvisably edible and its tooth-like maw unhinged to swallow the barrel whole.

The nameplate transformed before his eyes into [Suspicious Ironchest Mimic - Level 20] before it was swept away. It cackled with a disturbing, inhuman voice.

That was the strongest monster he had ever seen, and it was basically an inanimate object. If monsters got far fiercer at level 10, what happened at level 20?

He was fairly sure it had looked hungrily at him.

Waves of fetid water kept Luke moving swiftly. Another chest floated into his field of view. He was immediately wary of that one until it ground against the stone wall and spilled glittering jewels into the foaming depths.

Then he saw the large barge of wood, a nice solid platform of thick planks with the Archer and Gladiator safely perched atop.

With the raging flames all around, they didn't need a lantern to see by. The smoke would be an issue if they ever slowed down, but for now, it was a minor irritant.

Luke hoped his Fortitude was high enough to make it through.

The streaking arrows resumed. Firing from a barge of detritus on choppy, frothing water couldn't be easy, and they missed Luke by several feet each.

When he was able to spare a second, Luke hastily refilled the daggers in his belt. His mana was getting low, but he needed a greater reserve of ammunition.

Behind Luke, the barge was slowly catching up. Any barrels or threatening debris were taken out by the Gladiator who swept a large butterfly axe in both hands back and forth to bat them away.

When he wasn't clearing the path, he was using the axe head like a paddle to speed them up. Luke noticed the unused metal mace at the guy's hip. Clearly, the Gladiator liked heavy hitting weapons and had more than one just like him.

Luke weaved through burning piles of trash, bones of old corpses, and countless other horrendous, lumpy things that he didn't want to look too closely at. Throughout the entire chase, Luke turned from time to time and flung daggers at the pair.

If it wasn't for his enhanced Dexterity, he would have fallen off and been swept beneath the fetid flow long ago. As it was, he was barely managing to hold on.

The spillway ended abruptly with tall, stony protrusions that reminded Luke of traffic bollards. They broke up the flow of water and caught the trash before it flowed down into the massive yawning abyss ahead.

Twisting around once more, Luke tossed his throwing knives at the pair. If the Archer couldn't hit him, then Luke's chances were next to nil, but he needed to keep them distracted.

He wasn't prey to be chased and hunted.

The barriers were coming up faster than he would have liked. His shadow vision told him that the darkness beyond wasn't because the fires had been put out.

He racked his brain for a solution.

One he might have been able to come up with if he didn't notice the horrifying rage-filled gaze of a certain Mage staring at him with sodden hatred.

The Mage's body had been broken beyond belief by the stone protrusions designed to catch debris, but she hadn't died. With one

bloody eye shut, she still had a clear line of sight on Luke as he sped toward her.

Despite the water threatening to drown her as it surged over her, she never once faltered or stopped her casting. Explosions boomed around Luke, blowing him this way and that and catching his driftwood board on fire.

Luke reached behind and whipped out his ratking dagger. He was close enough to her that he could see her lips moving, the look of abject loathing clear in her one good eye.

With her last breath, she would kill him. That was her sole desire.

There was no time to take aim. Luke chucked the dagger at her with all his strength.

The serrated blade tumbled through the air and pierced the bloodied Mage in the chest just as her final spell went off. Whether she had misjudged the distance due to lack of depth perception or his final attack had done it, the spell missed him by inches.

Unfortunately, it hardly mattered when the explosive force was behind and below the water. It blew Luke out of the water just as he would have reached the stone pillars.

Flipping through the air over a yawning portal into the abyss was not the way Luke thought today was going to end. And if he didn't think quickly, it would be more than just his day ending here.

Observe, orient, decide, act, he repeated the mantra while trying to twist his burning and aching body through the air.

The room beyond was large and circular, like the world's biggest drain. The water flowed around in channels designed to overflow if there was too much debris like there was now.

A tingling in his hand told him that the ratking's blade was ready to return. He managed to sheath it mid-air, but his gloves were slick with slime and they were shaking as he realized how poor his outlook had become.

Pipes of countless sizes littered the vertical cylindrical chamber, but none close enough to be of any help as he flew out over the abyss and got a look into the infinite darkness.

Even his shadow vision couldn't see what was below. Most of the fire went out as soon as the waterfall fell below into the inky black.

As gravity reasserted its control over his body, Luke saw a series of dark shelves and protrusions around the rim of the cylinder below.

He jumped right through *orient* and *decide* and into *act* as fast as he could. Luke wiped his hands on his cloak, smearing slime all over it. He had to be ready to grab onto the nearest ledge.

Luke prayed his [Climbing Gloves] would give him enough grip to avoid the agonizing death that awaited him if he failed to grab onto one of those ledges.

While the pit of his stomach migrated north to his throat, Luke flailed in the air awkwardly to right himself. He never liked heights before. Now he hated them with a burning passion to rival the fiery trash river he had left behind.

His Dexterity helped immensely, but he was still free falling. The only hope of arresting his fall was a series of shelves sticking out into the flowing water.

As they came into view, Luke noticed that they weren't shelves of stone, which probably would have broken any number of bones as soon as he tried to grab on. They were rotten bits of driftwood strapped together with rope, spit, and ill-placed hope.

Beams that had likely been through previous floods were lodged in the cylinder of abyssal death like chicken bones in the throat of a giant.

Luke hit the first sodden beam wrapped with rags and plastered with slime. He wasn't sure which shattered first, his ribs or the beam, but in the end it didn't matter.

The splintered beam collapsed around him. There was another to replace it, and another after that. Each broken beam slowed him down so that by the third, he was able to wrap his arms and legs around it long enough to arrest his fall completely.

He never would have been able to keep his grip without those climbing gloves. Then again, he probably would have never made it down here without them.

A barrel careened overhead and smashed into the beam near the wall, causing the whole thing to pivot up the air and launch Luke like a catapult into the opposite wall.

He slammed into the slime-covered wall of flowing water with tooth-rattling force and then collapsed onto the rickety wooden walkway a few feet below.

The boards groaned ominously beneath him. Though he could have lied there for a good week to get his breath back, Luke forced himself to his feet.

It was only through sheer willpower and a deeply ingrained survival instinct that Luke was up and moving. Several bones were clearly broken, and he couldn't put much pressure on his wounded leg. One of the falls had done something nasty to the arrow inside his leg, but that was a problem for Future Luke.

Present Luke needed to survive long enough for him to have any problems to worry about.

Wooden boards creaked and cracked beneath his boots. Despite his ability to peer into shadow as if it was noonday, Luke was surprised to find the carved-out hallway hidden behind a curtain of fetid water.

As soon as he went inside, he collapsed onto the rounded floor. He drew the ratking's blade and looked around, expecting a threat.

For a wonder, the tunnel was mostly dry only a few feet in. He dragged himself deeper and sat with his back to the curved wall. To

his left, the water flowed past, making it difficult to see beyond. To his right, the tunnel went deeper and bent out of view.

Luke heard a pair of terrified screams dopplering past as the Archer and Gladiator finally caught up to him and passed him by.

Good riddance, Luke thought tiredly. Everything hurt, but at least he was safe for now.

Until some new horror crawled out of the woodwork to try to put an end to him.

It almost felt as if the world didn't want him here. How many times had he nearly died and only by the skin of his teeth did he survive? Too many times to count.

And yet they *kept happening*.

While Luke endured the pain, he found himself wondering just how long Henry and Marcy would come after him. All for defending himself and getting away. How many times would they try to kill him?

Then an even darker thought followed that.

Something would eventually have to give. Either one of their groups of assassins would finally do him in, or Luke would go after Henry and Marcy themselves to put a stop to it all.

By then, the duo would be firmly cemented in their little seat of power, surrounded by all their lackeys.

He had tried to avoid killing anybody who didn't try to kill him first, but if he went after them, there would be no avoiding innocent casualties.

Some part of him found the challenge thrilling, but the other understood that even if he backtracked now, he was in no condition to take them both out.

He would need to get stronger to ultimately put a stop to this.

The only way out is through.