Leveling up the World

#Chapter 11: Midnight Meeting - Read Leveling up the World Chapter 11: Midnight Meeting

Chapter 11: Midnight Meeting

Sneaking out of home, as Dallion found out, was the most difficult challenge he had faced so far. Finding himself in a strange new world with weird magic abilities, one would have expected fending off monsters or exploring dungeons to be the most challenging. Trying to sneak out unnoticed of a two-room house with a squeaky floor, proved to be an even greater feat.

Back in his previous life, this wouldnt have been an issue. With his parents working late most of the time, Dallion could walk out of the front door and nothing would happen. Even if they were there, all it took was to climb out of the window. Here, he had to work for it.

Using the same footwork he had developed through his Guard skills, the boy leapt from spot to spotrepairing the board underneath before it could make a sounduntil he finally reached the door. From there it was a quick pull and twist so he could open the door, then squeeze through the crack before it shut back againunlike the village chief, Dallions family could only afford a bar to keep it locked at night.

Good thing muscle memory is a thing, the boy thought.

Gloria had told him to be at the river at midnight. Thats why Dallion was there two hours earlier. The first half hour he spent seeking out a good ambush spot. Once he did, he hid there and waited, and waited and waited.

Twenty minutes later, the boy bitterly regretted his decision to appear early. Waiting in ambush, unlike the version shown in games and movies, turned out to be an utterly boring process. Dallion didnt have a phone or book to pass the time with. The only things he did have was the skill to tell time by the night sky, something taught to him by his father, and a sky to look at.

No one came at eleven, nor at eleven twenty, nor at eleven forty. Ten minutes to midnight, Dallion was virtually hoping that Gloria would appear with a few people in her household, so the whole thing could be over with at last. She didnt. Instead, the girl arrived at midnight on the dot. Apparently, she had far more common sense.

Dallion? the girl said in semi-whisper, looking around. Dallion?

At this point, the boy could no longer stand it. Throwing all caution to the wind, he left his hiding place and quickly rushed in her direction.

Dallion! Gloria saw him approach. Why are you coming from there?

I got lost, Dallion grumbled. The girls expression suggested that all sarcasm had been lost on her. Anyway, Im here. How do I improve my awakening?

We have to get there first. Gloria chuckled. It was nothing but a momentary smile under the moonlight, but it made her seem like a normal person for once. For a few seconds one could almost forget she was related to the village chief.

Wheres there exactly?

There was a long pause.

This is stupid, Dallion thought. Youll be taking me there, right?

To a cave a short way off, the girl said reluctantly.

Why didnt we meet there directly?

Its secret, alright? Only my grandfathers supposed to know about it. Once per year he takes one person from the family there to awaken them. Everyone is blindfolded, so that only he knows the exact location.

That sounded very much like the village chiefeven the members of his family were considered a threat. It was natural for him to monopolize a cheat that would grant him awakened powers much faster than the normal way, then use it to build up his family. Thats how you awakened?

Yes. The girl nodded. Its not something Im proud of. But that doesnt matter anymore. She clenched her fists. What matters is the future, and there isnt much time.

For the next hour, the two continued downstream along the river until they reached a rocky area. Large boulders emerged from the ground without rhyme or reason. Dallion vaguely remembered the place to be called ogre gorge. Ages ago, it was said, there had been a massive battle between two tribes of ogres the size of mountains. The fight had lasted for years, until all ogres killed each other, only their bones and shattered skulls remaining on the battlefield. The boulders visible now were said to be scattered teeth sticking out from the ground. It was a charming story, if utterly unbelievable.

Its not long now, Gloria said, walking through the clusters of rocks. You can almost see it from here.

No problem. Dallion smiled back. One question, though. If you were blindfolded when you got here, how did you find it?

My awakening. When I was given the option, I chose to improve my Perception. I remembered the sounds and smells on the way back.

Neat trick.

The cave emerged shortly later, delving in a boulder like a cavity in a tooth. Pitch dark and barely large enough to let a person pass, it continued on for a few dozen steps, ending in a large underground chamber. The entire time Dallion was forced to hold on to Gloria, after all, she was the one with the high perception. The only thing he could do in the situation was make sure he didnt fall or bump into anything.

Upon reaching the chamber, a warm golden glow emerged, covering everything in light.

You can let go now, the girl said, as she continued to the center of the area, where a small altar was located.

There were no words to describe the sight. The altar was dazzling with its simplicity. Unlike anything Dallion had seen in this or his previous life, it was perfectly monolithic shaped like a simplified hex grid. Six pillars of hex shaped crystal rose from the floor, surrounding a seventh. Grey lighta notion Dallion never thought could existshone through them, giving off a faint, but unmistakable sensation of power, like a holy artifact low on batteries.

Whats that? Dallion asked.

An altar of the Seven Moons, the girl replied. It must have been a shrine once, long forgotten and abandoned. Its power remains, though.

Its power?

The Seven Moons are what gave humanity the power of awakening. They can also help us grow. When you improve their altar, you actually improve yourself. Gloria put her left hand on top of the central pillar, then turned around and extended her right in Dallions direction. This is how youll gain your second skill.

Chapter 12: The Awakening Shrine

You are in a small Awakening shrine.

Complete the trial to improve your destiny!

Unlike the awakened rooms in the past this one was open. In fact, it wasnt so much a room than an open space surrounded by six columns. Bluish-white sky continued to the horizon above a ground of grey rock. There was no sun that could be seen, although Dallion could swear he almost saw the outlines of several moons in the whiteness above.

I was like that the first time I came here as well, Gloria said a few steps away. I spent hours looking at the sky.

Err how are you here?

This was the first time he had seen a living person in an awakening realm. Unusually, it had always been empty rooms, mazes, and item guardians. Having Gloria here, equipped with a long sabre, was beyond unexpected.

Shrines are different, she sighed like a teacher who had to repeat an explanation in class. By improving them, you improve yourself.

Dallion kept staring at her, as his mind tried to make sense of it all. On their own, each of the concepts was clear, simple, and understandable, but when jumbled together nothing seemed to make any sense.

The shrine is like you, the girl said, deliberately slow. If you complete a challenge here, its the same as if you complete a challenge for yourself. After that happens, you can claim the reward that it offers you as if its

I got that. Dallions pride kicked in, forcing him to interrupt. But why are there two of us? Thats not supposed to happen, even upon reaching a breakthrough.

The shrine allows other awakened to be invited for support

Finally things started to make sense. It wasnt so much that the girl wanted to help Dallion, rather she had come to him for help. Granted, it was mutual helphe was also going to get a free breakthrough as a result, and at a time he needed it.

This isnt your first time here, is it?

Its my fifth. The last time was two years ago.

That was quite a while ago.

Why did you stop?

When I failed last time, the shrine suggested I find another awakened to help me. The girl gave Dallion a long, silent look. Now I have.

There wasnt anyone else you could ask?

No one I can rely on. Everyone awakened in the village is either old, or part of my family. You hate my grandfather and have as much to lose if he found out you know about the shrine.

One could only be impressed by her logic and petty mercantile nature. It was obvious she had plans of her own that didnt involve the village chief, or anyone else for that matter. The moment she had approached Dallion had been meticulously calculated to be at the point he couldnt refuse. In the boys mind there was no doubt that the village chief had prepared a task beyond his awakening level. Still, Gloria could have simply come up to him with the offer earlier.

Whats the trial? Dallion smiled. No point in being upset at what could have been.

Im not sure. The previous tasks were combat, so probably the next will be as well. She turned to her left and took a step forward. An arch formed between the columns in front of her, marked by the glowing number four.

Fourth trial? Dallion wondered. If so, that meant that the shrine was limited to six trials.

Remember, well need to work together on this, Gloria said in a bossy fashion. Ill focus on attacking the monster, while you guard me.

How come I do the guarding? Dallion grumbled.

You have the Guard skills. She pointed at his buckler with her sabre. With a perception of six, I could tell the moment you improved my ring.

When people wanted to brag, they would often slip in a piece of useless information to attract the listeners focus. Gloria was no different, mentioning her perception skills, again, then stressing on the level in an attempt to impress. Dallion, in contrast, remained silent. He could easily have mentioned that he had reflexes at six, despite only being a level one awakened. There was still the option that he did, though, maybe after the trial was complete.

Shrine trial 4 chosen!

Prepare for combat!

The moment the two walked through the archway, all remaining columns melted away. A strong gust of wind appeared out of nowhere sending a wave of dust at them. Instantly, Dallion jumped in front of the girl, protecting his own face with his buckler.

The sandstorm kept building up for a while until suddenly it stopped. Dallion, however, took no chances, keeping the buckler in front.

Are you alright? he asked, glancing about.

The landscape had changed completely. No longer the endless barren plain, it was now a desert. Bright orange rays scorched on dunes of rusty sand for as far as the eye could see.

Im fine.

Did this happen last time?

Sort of The girl her lip, hesitating. There still was a desert, but no storm.

I guess this happens when you invite someone over. Any other surprises I should know about?

Can we just get this over? Gloria snapped.

Yes, your highness. Dallion smirked, lowering his shield. Ill get right to defeating His words trailed off.

SHRINE GUARDIAN

Species: DRAGON

Class: SAND

Statistics: UNKNOWN

Skills:

- SANDSTORM
- UNKNOWN
- UNKNOWN

Weak Spots: EYES

The size of a small commercial airplane, a massive beast towered above Dallion, glaring at him with glowing amber eyes. It was everything one would imagine an eastern dragon to be: long, scaly, snakelike, with a massive head that could gobble up Dallions house for breakfast. Upon seeing the two minuscule humans, the creature snorted, releasing streams of sand into the air from its nostrils.

Err, Gloria? Dallion asked in his quietest and most polite tone. Was this the guardian you faced before?

Speechless, the girl slowly shook her head.

I didnt think so

COMBAT INITIATED!

Chapter 13: Darude Sandstorm Dragon

Darude! Dallion shouted as he rushed forward, pushing Gloria to the side.

He had already seen the giant green cone covering them both as well as the footprints telling him how to evade it. This time he had also seen a series of orange footprints. Diverging from the others, the orange markers went to Gloria, suggesting that would protect her as well. Either that, or meant that the path was more dangerous. Either way, Dallion decided to act.

The days of training had allowed him to execute the guard action flawlesslythe series of eight steps was matched without an issue. As before, time froze, only now a second series of yellow steps emerged along with hand positions.

So, guard skills can be used on others as well, Dallion thought. Taking advantage of the adrenalin rushing through his veins, he grabbed Gloria in the airfollowing the instructionsthen ran on outside of the green cones range. Moments later he found that he had failed to do so in time.

A cone of sand emerged from the dragons mouth, blasting everything in its path. Dallion felt it brush against the sole of his foot, scraping off the lower part of his shoe, then continuing to the peel off part of his skin. The pain, thankfully, wasnt significant, but it was a noticeable warning not to take the challenge lightly.

What are you doing?! Gloria pulled away. The not thank you that Dallion expected, but not a reaction he was surprised with either.

Youre welcome, he grumbled.

I was about to attack! she hissed. All you had to do was

Get back! Dallion shouted.

A green circle appeared in the sand in front of them. As Dallion spoke, the dragon crashed down, disappearing from view. This time, Gloria reacted, doing a spinning back somersault from her spot. Her technique was flawless, capable of putting Olympic medalists to shame. Dallion had never been a fan of gymnastics, but he knew excellence when he saw it. There was no way such a feat could be achieved through training, it had to be a skill.

Ouch, I have to get back too!

The boy pulled back just in the nick of time, saved by his high reflexes. The green circle burst in a waterrise of sand as the dragon emerged. Dallions fear was that the creature would attack in some elaborate fashion, possibly swipe its tail. However, no green markings appeared.

Its not going to attack! the boy shouted.

That proved to be more than enough for Gloria. On cue, she jumped in the air, rising parallel to the sand dragon. In that single moment, it was as if her sabre danced through the air. The movement was faster than Dallion could keep track. It wasnt so much that she was faster than him, Dallion had already established that based on her reactions, and yet at the same time she was at least when it came to handling a sabre.

Hell twist around! Dallion shouted as green lines appeared in the air.

Instantly, Gloria twisted mid flight, pushing herself away from the dragon with a gracious kick only to land beside him seconds later. Someone had definitely been practicing, and quite a lot.

Wow, Dallion thought.

He had been practicing for less than a week and he could already see the results of his troubles. Gloria had had years to perfect her abilities, as did every other awakened in the village chiefs family. Given that, and the cheat to increase their awakening level, it was natural for them to be so arrogant.

All clear now, Dallion said as the Dragon continued up. They probably had ten seconds before the next attack. How many skills do you know?

Two, she said in a smug voice, suggesting that it was a big deal. Help me defeat this and youll end up with two as well.

While that sounded good, it was easier said than done. Dallions guard skill allowed him to protect himself, and Gloria, apparently. However, the attack had done next to nothing. Looking at the white rectangle above the creature, its health remained at ninety-seven percent. If three percent was the average, it was going to take thirty-three more attacks to take it down.

Darude sandstorm! Dallion shouted. Watch out!

As the dragon had turned its head on its way back towards the ground, a green cone only visible to Dallion had emerged. This time Gloria knew how to react, freezing in place. Several sets of footprint markers appeared. Two sets were glowing orange.

So thats it, Dallion rushed forward. The color did in fact indicate whether a skill was for his own or assisted use. Interesting in what circumstances it would turn red.

Hold on!

Among the two options he had, one was to leap to the side, same as before. The other was far more interesting. Twice as complicated, it involved reaching Gloria, lifting her

up, then thrusting her up into the air, before in turn plunging forward beyond the sand columns reach.

Two steps, one turn, three more steps, and a semi-twist with the last. The moment Dallion completed the sequence, time froze, as he expected.

Gloria, III boost you up. He could only hope she was capable of hearing him, if nothing else. Jump up from there and try to attack it. The weak spot is the eyes.

The moment he added the last, Dallion instinctively felt silly. Of course. Shed know where the weak spots were she had a perception far better than his own. If anything, it was likely thanks to her that he got to see any additional information at all.

Here goes. He completed the second sequence.

Dallions hands moved through the air, thrusting the girl up just strong enough to escape the dragons attack. When she propelled herself further, a smile appeared on his face. The plan had worked. She had managed to understand his intention and was now executing it. From this point on, it all depended on her. The only thing Dallion had to focus on was to leap away.

The two successful sequences triggered the guard skills additional ability, granting him the option to jump safely out of danger. Dallion took full advantage.

When time returned to normal, the sand torrent blasted past, less than a step away.

COMBINATION ATTACK

Dealt damage was increased by 200%

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt damage was increased by 150%

Two red rectangles appeared in the air.

Chapter 14: Out of the Box

The sand dragon entered the sand with a splash, though not before Dallion could see its status rectangle. Seventy-nine percent of health remainednot bad for a single attack, although after all the damage bonuses he had hoped for more. Without a doubt this opponent was beyond anything he had faced before.

Careful. Gloria landed a few steps away. Its bound to come for another run.

Right. He gathered as much. How did you do so much damage?

My attack skills are at ten.

No doubt impressive, and yet quite low considering the time shed had to practice. Just by improving small items she should have been well into double digits so far, if not triple. There had to be some other reason.

I dont see him anywhere. Dallion looked around. For the moment there were no green markings in sight. Think he ran away?

Guardians dont run away, Gloria said in an indignant tone, though she too looked about. They shouldnt run away, she added moments later.

Just before Dallion could complain that the battle felt anticlimactic, a green zone appeared beneath his feet. Step markers soon followed.

Damn it! He started running. Its under us!

There was no way to avoid the attack. All visible escape footprints rose into the air, telling Dallion unequivocally that even with his reflexes, he couldnt get out of range. What he could do, hopefully, was to end up in a safe enough position to minimize the potential damage.

Grab onto me! The boy reached Gloria. When he emerges, jump!

What do you mean?

There was fear in Glorias eyesa feeling she had rarely felt outside of home. As every common person, hearing an explanation would have gone a long way, sadly any explanation required time and that was something neither of them had right now.

Two sets of teeth, the size of locks, began to emerge from the sand on both sides of Dallion and Gloria. Apparently, the dragon was smart enough not to try the same attack twice. After losing an eye in its first surprise attack, the creature had decided to swallow his prey outright, saving itself attritional wounds. However, every plan had its weakness.

Jump! Dallion grabbed the girl through the waist.

There was a moments hesitation, but she did as she was told, propelling both upwards faster than the dragon.

So far so good,

the boy told himself. The first step had gone according to plan. Now, the tricky part began.

It was all a gambleDallions reflexes level allowed him to start an action faster than the shrine guardian. He only hoped that Glorias perception would allow her to notice what he was about to attempt and react accordingly. A moments delay or hesitation and the whole thing was over.

Time froze again, only this time only in the boys mind. Gritting his teeth, he twisted in the air, then let go of Gloria, placing his buckler between them.

Please figure it out.

The second stretched for eternity as he watched the girl remain still, doing nothing. Was he wrong about her? Had she frozen up with fear? Or did he overestimate her out of the box thinking. It wasnt like any other action would have saved him, but he had hoped they could achieve a miracle and pull this off.

Just as he was about to lose hope, Gloria twisted in the air as well. Lifting both legs against her until the knees reached her chest, the girl then extended like a spring. The soles of her shoes hit Dallions buckler right in the center, repelling both of them from each other like same pole magnets. It was a reckless idea, absurd even, and it had worked.

OUT OF THE BOX!

Unorthodox thinking at a moments notice!

A rectangle appeared, only to be punched away by Dallion. As much as he liked praise, right now he wanted to be able to actually see what was going on.

The dragon flew up, just as Dallion evaded its giant maw. Somehow, he had managed to survive this one. Hopefully, Gloria had done so as well. Given that she was lighter than himor at least he assumed that to be the casephysics suggested that she must have travelled a greater distance, putting her safely out of danger. The red rectangle that appeared moments later confirmed his theory.

COMBINATION ATTACK

Dealt damage was increased by 200%

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt damage was increased by 150%

Sweet! Dallion grinned.

That had to be another large chunk of life gone. The first thing he was going to do upon landing was to check the dragons status rectangle. Before that, though, he had to worry

about getting as little damage as possible. Alas for him, gravityor the ground for that matterproved not to be an enemy, rendering the boys guard skills useless.

SERIOUS FALL!

Health has been decreased by 20%

Twenty for a bump? Dallion groaned.

The pain had been less than he had imagined, almost as if hed fallen on a pile of hay after a three-story jump. His pride, on the other hand, had suffered far more. The gamer in him grumbled that he should have managed a flawless execution and not botch the landing especially.

Wasting no time, the boy got back to his feet and looked up. The dragon had already reached the peak of its ascent, starting the fall back down towards the sand. Normally that would be a cause for concern. The lack of green markers, though, made it clear that no attack was imminent.

Dallion! Glorias voice came from above.

The girl hit the sand about ten steps away, landing far more elegantly than Dallion. The entire front of her clothes had been splashed with rusty blood.

I hope that comes out, the boy thought as he waved.

Are you crazy? She rushed towards him. Why in the world did you try something like that?!

It worked. Dallion shrugged. Its not like you came up with anything. Besides, you got another hit. Now all we have to do is repeat this a few more times and

The SHRINE Guardian has admitted defeat.

Do you accept his surrender?

Two additional rectangles appeared underneath: one had the image of a hand giving a thumbs up, the other had the thumb pointing down. Glorias hand moved towards the thumb down rectangle.

Hey! Dallion caught her hand. Why continue? We won, didnt we?

You came here for more skills, right? Defeating the guardian is the only way to guarantee that.

We defeated it. Look, he surrendered.

Fine. Gloria pulled her hand back. Im sure to boost my level. If you want to gamble with your future, go ahead.

Was killing the dragon the only way to gain a skill? Dallion couldnt be sure, but he definitely didnt want to keep on fighting the creature unless he had to. Continuing the battle would only become more difficult. Already he felt low on stamina; combining that with the fact that his adrenalin boost was wearing off, it made much more sense to accept a quick victory.

After a few more moments of hesitation, the boy tapped on the thumbs up rectangle. A new series of rectangles appeared.

Damn it Dallion whimpered.

Chapter 15: Crossroads

You are at a crossroads.

Choose the item that will serve you best.

Two rectangles floated in front of Dallion. One had had a realistic picture of a short sword, the same the boy had seen upon waking up in this world. The other had a blacksmiths anvil. From what Dallions grandfather had said, crafting skills were quite rare and among the most valued; getting one would set up a person for life. They opened the path to apprenticeship in any of the Service Guilds that inevitably lead to any of the big cities. The chances of getting crafting skills were one in a dozen, maybe more. Unfortunately, they wouldnt serve him in battle.

Why Dallion clenched his fists.

Whats wrong? Gloria moved closer to him, concern in her voice. Didnt you get a skill?

I got a skill Dallion said through his teeth. There was no point in sharing the entire picture. I got Attack.

Attack was without doubt the most common of all skills. From what Dallions mother and grandfather had said, half of all awakened started with that skill. And now he was forced to take it in the place of something valuable. Dallion tapped on the sword rectangle.

ATTACK skills obtained.

You have broken through your second barrier.

You jerk. Gloria frowned. I was scared you hadnt gotten anything. Attacks just what you need. A bit of practice and you should be able to pass grandfathers trial. After all, it cant

be as difficult as this. Yes. Dallion struggled to hide his disappointment. His entire being was shaking on the inside. It cant be as difficult as this

You are Level 2

Choose the focus you value the most so you can leave the Awakening shrine.

As before, the boy was given four statistics to choose from: Body, Mind, Reaction, and Perception. Interestingly enough, his Mind had increased by two without Dallion doing anything. Dallion felt an urge to increase it to six, or even increase his Reaction further. Thinking about it for a few moments he decided to go improve his perception. As Gloria had shown, the skill could be quite useful.

You have assisted GLORIA LUOR in her trial

GLORIA LUORs Level has increased to 4.

The desert disappeared in the blink of the eye, returning Dallion and Gloria back to the shrine cave. As if sensing their return, the altar faded out, plunging them into darkness. This time, Dallion found that he could see. It wasnt much, barely the outlines of the cave entrance, but it was far more than he could before.

Come on. Gloria grabbed him by the hand. Were done.

Sure. Dallion took a step forward. The sole of his foot was still burning, causing him to limp slightly.

The two walked in silence. Every now and again Gloria would stop for a few moments, so her companion could rest a bit, then continue on without a word.

Various thoughts kept spinning in Dallions mind. It was as if three different realities were fighting for space in his skull, trying to impose his dominance. A lot had happened in the last few days, but also nothing at all. Until a moment ago the boy thought he had grasped the basics of awakendness, along with all relative theories. His later experience had shown him how insignificant his knowledge was; not so much in terms of specific skills, but in terms of life in this world in general. This bodys past existencefor lack of a better wordhad come with a set of vague memories, giving him the illusion he knew a little about everything. That might have been well true, but only for an uninquisitive mind.

Thinking back, Dallion knew quite a lot about the village, the people in it, especially his own family, and precious little else. Try as he might, he couldnt even come up with the name of the village, let alone anything beyond. He knew there were cities in the country he wasby all indications a kingdom, or empire of sortsfilled with guilds and nobles, he knew there was a capital. There were indications that the country was, or had been, at war so many questions Dallion had been comfortable not asking. Before his awakening

there hadnt been any pointhe was going to live and likely die in the village, never knowing what lay in the world beyond.

Gloria, Dallion began once they left the cave. Have you thought of leaving the village?

Get free of my grandfather? The girl let out a sad laugh. All the time. But I know its impossible.

Dallion arched a brow.

Even if hed let me, whats the point? Life always seems better out there, but is it? My father tried it once when he was young he didnt last a month. There was a deep sigh.

Is it so dangerous outside?

I dont know. Maybe. However, its harsh to anyone with doubts. Look at my grandfather. He has skills, money, even connections with travelling merchants, and he has still chosen to remain here. At most hed go to one of the nearby villages to discuss arranged marriages, then return.

There was a long pause. The girl looked up at the night sky. Dallion noticed the minuscule signs of sadness on her faceturned down corners of her mouth, slight wincing of the eyes, and her breathing becoming slower and deeper than a moment ago. Had these indications always been there? Or was it his recently improved perception that had given him an edge?

Grandfather went to a city once. It was long ago, before my father was born. He doesnt talk about it, but when he has nightmares, he screams about it in his sleep. The others pretend it doesnt happen. They cant make out the screams, though. I could. Gloria looked back at the boy. The city changed him. I dont know why or how, but it turned him into what he is now. One has to be crazy to go there. I know I wont, and unless you want to become like him, or join the Order of the Seven Moons, you mustnt either.