

Leveling up the World

Chapter 26: Outclassed

Whoever said that the larger a creature, the slower its actions clearly had no idea what they were talking about. As Dallion found out, the pack-panther was not only big roughly the size of an elephant but also had reflexes rivaling his own. The first time it attacked, the boy barely had the time to evade by following the guard skill markers that had appeared. What was more, the beast had no intention of letting him make use of his specials, interrupting the boy mid sequence with further consecutive attacks.

How did I get myself mixed up in this? Dallion wondered as massive clawed paws swirled around him.

Ten minutes ago, it had seemed like a solution to defeating the pack had been found. Now, the boy was engaged in surviving to such a degree that he didn't even have time to worry what might happen. All his regrets for not choosing the rare crafting skills had also evaporated.

Let me attack! Dallion shouted, slashing at the beast's paw.

There was a loud howl accompanied by a shearing sound. Half of the paw fell off, disappearing in a puff of smoke, only to get restored moments later. Apparently, simple attacks weren't going to do a lot. There went the hope that one good strike would kill off the monster.

Struggling to suppress the increasing pain in his leg, Dallion hopped several steps back. To his surprise, the panther didn't immediately follow. It was a minor thing, something the boy wouldn't have even noticed before. Now, though, he saw it for the opportunity it was and didn't hesitate to take advantage of it.

Green and red footsteps appeared, directing Dallion towards his enemy: a three-step approach, a sidestep while using the buckler to defend against the inevitable paw slam, a crouch-twist, then finally a slash in the beast's back. The sequence was complicated and would undoubtedly result in pain, but it was the only chance Dallion had.

Taking a deep breath, the boy rushed forward. The monster reacted as the markers suggested it would; it focused on the boy, then attempted to slice him in half with its massive claws. The buckler met the paw head on, pushing Dallion back in the process.

Crouch-twist, the boy said to himself, angling the shield so the attacker's remaining strength didn't affect him. The paw slid off, ripping the air above his head.

Got you! The panthers side was exposed. As tempting as it was to attack immediately, Dallion followed through with his sequence, ending at the creatures back. Only then did he strike.

At that moment several things happened at once. Time went to a crawl. A second set of red-green markers appeared, suggesting how Dallion should follow up the attack. As the boy thrust his sword, though, the panthers body also changed. Two creature heads emerged from the massive monsters back, like creatures leaping out of a pool in slow motion. Two green lines appeared linking the two new heads to Dallions arm.

Damn it!

That was the price of overconfidence. All this time the boy had considered his enemies to be brainless mobs that did the same actions over and over again. As it turned out, they too could form strategies and also trick him into following a certain path. The beast had sacrificed part of its health, but in exchange had gotten Dallions attack arm. Without a sword the boy had as much chance of winning as a dodo bird flying over the Atlantic.

Think!

Dallions reaction level still allowed him to do something, but what? If he went through with his attack, both he and the monster would suffer serious damage. If he didnt, there was no telling whether hed get another opening. Was this a time to be reckless or to exert caution for once?

Options played out through his mind. There was no way he could twist his arm to achieve both goals. It was either mutual damage or no damage at all.

Crap!

If only he had a better weapon, or even two weapons, he wouldnt be facing such a dilemma. It was said that only incompetent players blamed their gear, but in this case Dallion had a reason to. There was only so much he could do with a short sword. Also, it was not like he could pick the weapon up with his left hand and keep on fighting. Awakening had granted him a lot of abilities, but ambidexterity wasnt one of them. As things stood now, he only had one sword arm and one shield arm which for some reason he hadnt been using to attack.

Thats it!

Mustering all his remaining strength, Dallion swung his buckler at the two heads while continuing with his sword attack. Timing was key. The tip of the sword sunk in the panthers path. The creature heads opened their jaws, aiming to bite into his wrist. Before they could, though, the edge of the buckler hit the leftmost one on the side.

COMBINATION ATTACK

Dealt damage increased by 200%

Both heads disappeared in a puff of smoke as Dallions continued on until the entire blade was buried in the monster.

An ear-popping howl shattered the air, forcing Dallion to jump back. The panther did the same, doubling the distance between them.

Thank goodness, Dallion managed to say, breathing heavily.

The pain in his body had subsided, replaced by numbness. By the looks of it, the panther wasnt doing much better. The constantly attacking monster had taken a defensive stance, glaring at Dallion with such ferocity that it could drill a hole through concrete with its gaze alone. Also, the creature appeared to have shrunk in size by roughly a third. It was still quite large, but not even close to the monster it had been at the start of the battle.

Of course! Dallion smiled. Everything was clear now. The creature was the embodiment of the pack, and as such shared all of its characteristics. Each successful strike corresponded to the death of a pack member, and as the pack members diminished, so did the overall size of the enemy.

Good attempt, but itll take more than that to defeat me. Dallion smirked. Finally, hed gotten to use some cheese in real life without being judged. Darude! He charged forward.

Chapter 27: Stars and Moons

Stars. Until now Dallion had never realized how much he missed them. Not the few pale dots he saw from the city, real stars, covering the sky like salt on a black napkin. Even the moons had lit up, emanating a crisp colored glow. Lying on his back, Dallion raised his hand up, as if stretching to grab hold of one. It was childish, but right now he wanted to be a child, at least for a little longer.

The fight against the pack had exhausted him more physically than mentally to the point of collapse. He had suffered a few more bites, each costing the boy between five and ten percent health, and seen things he wished he hadnt, but in the end he had won.

After the fight, the realm of the Well had become much brighter, not only the rocks and streams, but the air itself. Dallion could smell freshness and the unmistakable sensation of joy with every breath. There was nothing like this on Earth, or even back in the village. Despite the freshness of the air, there was a lingering sensation of unease, probably because everyone was so afraid of the village chief so much.

The seven moons, Dallion whispered out loud.

What did they really represent? Representations of deities? Sources of awakened abilities? Both? Dallion had often come across them mentioned in everyday talk, and still that's all they were parts of phrases. Everyone knew that there was some order or religion based on them, just as everyone knew that their monasteries were willing to accept anyone, even social pariahs but that was all. It wasn't only that people didn't have answers, they didn't have questions either. Dallion himself had the faintest of interest, everything considered. All his efforts were entirely focused on getting him to level up and improve his skills, almost to the point of obsession.

I really need to live more and level less, don't I? he asked the moons. To his slight disappointment, the moons didn't reply. Unfortunately, something else did the nagging voice that reminded the boy that the realm was only ninety-nine percent repaired. With a bit of effort, Dallion could easily track down the final creature and end it to get the coveted hundred percent.

Maybe tomorrow, the boy closed his eyes.

The night passed quickly and painlessly. In the morning, Dallion felt completely refreshed. The pain had all but subsided along with the hunger. It was almost surprising how comfortable sleeping on rocks could be after a fight.; either that or mending the realm had changed its properties.

After a stretch, Dallion went to the nearest stream for a drink and quick wash. Once done, he set off up the mountain once more. The nagging reminder of the missing one percent kept pestering him a bit longer, but soon gave way to his determination to get done with the challenge and return to the real world.

If I come across it, I come across it, Dallion told himself and persisted on. The higher he got, the steeper the mountain became. The easy path soon disappeared, forcing him to do some rudimentary climbing. Thankfully, he could still avoid the vertical sections. By the early afternoon he had halved the distance yet again. By his rough estimations, about two dozen miles separated him from the top. Normally, Dallion would pass such a distance in a few hours. Considering he was climbing, he hoped he could manage by nightfall.

Alas, he didn't.

When the sun touched the horizon several hundred feet remained the most difficult yet. Sharp cliffs, half of them vertical, led on forcing the boy to make full use of his perception and reflexes to move from one ledge to the next. The boy was lucky enough to reach a small recess in the rocks, just large enough for him to curl up for the night.

Dallion's recklessness urged the boy to keep going for the top, his common sense told him that it would be a terrible idea trying to climb in the dark.

Tomorrow, he told himself. I'll get there tomorrow.

The following morning, he continued again. Despite his initial enthusiasm, though, progress was incredibly slow. Lacking Glorias skills, he had to fight for every inch, at times taking hours to climb a few dozen feet. It was only in the evening that he managed after a few slips and several dozen near falls to pull himself onto the top.

Once there, Dallion plopped on the hard surface like a steak in a frying pan. This whole endeavor felt more difficult than besting the panther pack. Now he understood why people held awakened in such high regard. Awakened skills made difficult things easy. Without them, a person would have to undergo years or decades of rigorous training in order to partially achieve what skills provided. If Dallion had climbing skills, the whole trip up here might have taken him less than a day, and even be enjoyable.

No pain, no gain, the boy thought, remembering the phrase his mother back on Earth used to say. *At least Im here now.*

Although that could pass as a huge achievement, it was not why he was here. There was still the minor matter of facing the Wells guardian in order to escape this realm. Given how difficult the fight with the pack was, it was safe to assume that the guardian would be no pushover. Come to think about it, there was no telling what exactly the guardian would be like. In the past each had characteristics of the item they were in. But what were the characteristics of a well?

I guess there'll be lots of rocks and water. Dallion mused as he stood up.

The top of the mountain was roughly the size of a tennis court, only composed entirely of stone. There were no altars, thrones, columns, or anything else indicating a battle arena. What the boy could see, though, even in the moonlight was a dark patch right in the middle.

Could it? His heart skipped a beat. Had he just found the last creature in the realm?

Chapter 28: Rock and Cub

The boy rushed to the spot. There was a small hole in the rock, no larger than a punch bowl. In it, curled up, was a small panther-like cub. Sensing Dallion, the cub opened a lazy eye, then suddenly jumped up, hissing with the ferocity of a YouTube kitten.

You're the last beast?

The boy blinked. He knew that the creatures were a representation of the cracks and decay in the wells surface. Killing it would be a good thing, not to mention earn him a hundred percent mending rate. Even so, he had mixed feelings about this.

Hey, hey, little guy. He extended his left hand. As expected, the panther cub bit a finger. Also, as expected, the pain was so insignificant that it made the creatures efforts to fight

cute. Dons be like that. Dallion petted it with his left hand. A hundred percent or not, he wasnt killing it. Im not here for you. Just get back to sleep, okay?

The question made the cub pause. For several seconds, it remained still, reducing what little pressure it had on Dallions finger, then it let go.

Thats right. The boy petted it on the head. Just curl back up. Ill be gone soon and you can get back to whatever you want.

Faint purring came from the creature.

Yeah, yeah. Dallion laughed. I dont suppose you know where the guardians at?

The cub tilted its head, then curled back in its spot, still looking at the boy.

Guess not. That would have been too easy. Anyway, get back to sleep. Ill deal with this on my own. Just please dont do too much damage when Im gone.

Hardly had he taken a few steps away when a series of mew-like squeaks filled the air.

Are you serious? Dallion looked over his shoulder. The cub increased the intensity of its mewing, clearly indicating it wanted him to return. Being in a family that had three cats and a Labrador, Dallion was well versed in the wants of creatures. This cub might well be a theoretical embodiment of damage in another world, but in many ways it remained a kitten.

Fine. Dallion returned to the cub and tapped the top of its head with a finger. Serves me right for not fighting you, right?

The purring resumed.

Right.

After everything hed been through, the last thing Dallion imagined hed be doing once at the top was to be playing with a panther cub creature. The saddest thing was that this creature was better behaved than all the cats Dallion had, and the vast majority of the ones hed seen. The only thing it seemed to want was to remain curled up, eyes closed, and be constantly petted.

Youve never been petted before, have you?

While petting, Dallion looked in the distance. The ring of surrounding mountains was perfectly visible, marking the end of the world. They rose just as high as before. Even with all the skills in the world, Dallion doubted he could reach their peaks, and even if he did, there was no telling what he might see beyond.

This is one crazy place. And to think its just a well. Out there youre probably a crack in a stone, and here

Dallions words trailed off. The cub had reduced in size. Still purring, parts of it would vanish into the night each time Dallions hand passed over it. A short while later it was all gone.

Realm fully mended!

The WELL is now flawless!

The rectangle came with a large dose of bittersweetness. Dallion had fully mended the realm, which means that the village wouldnt worry about their water source. It also meant that the cub had gone.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACH!

Finding an alternative way to a problem always leads to choice, though choice sometimes comes with danger.

A philosopher, or someone with a lot of time, would have come up with a lot of questions on the topic. Were cracks alive? Or were they merely a representation of the Wells inner pain and fears? Was getting an alternative approach a good thing or not? What was the meaning of it all? As it turned out, Dallion was neither.

With the disappearance of the last creature, the dark patch beneath it vanished as well, but that was not all. The rock surface also started to go. A small hole emerged continuously growing larger, pulverizing everything around.

COMBAT INITIATED!

Dallion jumped back and drew his sword. In the second hed done so, the hole had grown to the size of a dining table. Perfectly round, it kept growing until it reached half the diameter of the mountaintop.

For over a minute Dallion stood there, anxiously waiting for something to happen. Some guardians waited to be challenged, otherslike the sand dragonmade a grand entrance. After another minute, curiosity and lack of patience shoved him to the edge of the hole.

Hello? Dallion peeked down.

Surprisingly, the core of the mountain wasnt dark or empty. Blue shimmering water shone from the bottom.

A well,the boy laughed. The arena is a well.

Why did it have to be the inside of a well?

As if in answer, the water rippled, then burst up. Green markers emerged, indicating how the boy should hold his shield in order to protect himself from the torrent of water. Dallion followed them on instinct, taking a few steps back.

The jet of water burst on by him, reaching up to the sky like a truck of mentos falling into a cola lake. Dallion could swear that the blue moon was almost hit. As the water fell back into the well, a new creature had appeared right across on the other side of the opening.

WELL GUARDIAN

Species: GOLEM

Class: STONE

Statistics: UNKNOWN

Skills

- **Water Jet**

- **Rock Throw**

- **UNKNOWN**

Weak Spots: Tendons

Dallion swallowed. The golem wasn't terribly large, in fact it was about the same size as the Colossus he had faced a week ago. Polished ovals of stone formed its head, hands, and legs, surrounded and held together by glowing blue water in the form of a body. In any game, movie, or miniature store, this would have passed as cool. Having one as an opponent was less cool.

Any chance you'd go for a draw? Dallion asked.

The golem shook its head.

Chapter 29: Promise in a Dream

Huh? The village chief blinked as Dallion let go of his hand.

That wasn't the only change. The stone well had become completely transformed. Nearly double in size, it now had two separate sections as well as a fountain head pouring water directly without the need of a bucket.

This wasn't supposed to happen. The well challenge should have been the end of Dallion. Even with his second skill feat that Aspion had no idea how the boy had accomplished improving the well had to be impossible. The chief had personally spent an entire day checking the state of structures in the village to find one suitable for the task. The well had been the perfect choice on the surface it seemed in mostly okay condition, though it was on the brink of collapse. If it hadn't been for Dallion, the chief would have mended part of it himself in another month or so. Dallion succeeding in the challenge had ruined all that.

I've improved the well, Dallion said loudly. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to go through with this and help the inhabitants of this village. The boy said, rubbing his success in the old man's face. The well should be good for decades to come.

The boy expected cheers, clapping, or even some sort of excitement, if not for him, for the fact that the well had been improved. Instead, all he saw were tense smiles. What was more, the crowd wasn't looking at him, but at the village chief.

Good. The chief's smile didn't drop, although Dallion could clearly see it was fake. I expected nothing less from the grandson of Seene. You've done magnificently, bringing the well to its current state. It must have been quite a battle?

It was.

In fact, that wasn't exactly the truth. There had been intense interaction between Dallion and the well guardian, but it wasn't what the chief, or even the boy for that matter, expected. Ultimately, the only thing that mattered was the result, although Dallion now had a debt to pay.

The boy's stomach growled.

Err, sorry about that. Dallion swallowed. Days of hunger had accumulated despite only a second passing in the real world.

You're hungry. To be expected after such a task. Come, this is a day of celebration! There will be a feast in your honor! I'll make sure that

I wouldn't want to inconvenience the village chief, Dallion interrupted, doing the exact opposite. You've already shown me so much kindness. I just want to spend some time with my family and get some rest.

Aspion's smile thinned. Anywhere else Dallion would have been severely punished, but the presence of the crowd protected him. The old man had gone through too much trouble to make this a public event as a warning what would happen to anyone, awakened or not, who stood up to him. However, that relied on Dallion failing. Now that the boy succeeded despite being set up, the chief couldn't just deny his victory. Doing so would only make him appear weak.

How do you like them apples, old man? Dallion smiled.

As you wish, Aspion said. You are the hero of the day, after all. You have earned your rest. Go spend it with your family. He then briskly turned around, heading to his mansion, hurriedly followed by the rest of his entourage.

About half a minute later, once the entire Luor family had left, the square erupted in cheers. Everyone wanted to be close to Dallion, wishing him the best, thanking him, and complimenting him on his success. It was as if the boy had become a superstar overnight. If only people knew what he had gone through to achieve this.

Among the thanks and shoulder pats, Dallion felt an arm grab him by the shoulders.

I have you, his grandfather whispered. Just stay up for a while longer, Ill take you home.

Thanks, Dallion managed to say.

The next few minutes were a bit blurry. It was as if the end of the trial had removed a huge weight off his shoulders, signaling his whole body it could calmly pass out. Dallion watched as he was walked out of the square into a room with a bed. As the boy collapsed in it, he saw images of his old room: the desk, the posters, the shelves of books and comics, even the potato PC that was so old it had troubles running most games in the last three years.

Wow. Dallion blinked. That was some trip. *But it seemed so real*

The awakening, the fights, even some of the villagers. Hed had long conversations with people, cracked jokes, even almost punched a few in the face. A pity that none of them were real. Some of them werent bad. His family had been nice, his younger brother was the epitome of joy and mischief. Even Gloria wasnt that bad in her own unique way.

I better cut down on the parties, Dallion sat up. He didnt want to get kicked out of college on his first day. Besides

Dallion suddenly stopped. He wasnt supposed to be in his old room he was supposed to be in his college dorm. What was he doing here, then?

Uncertain, the boy went to the door and opened it. He could hear a faint sizzling sound along with the smell of grilled cheese. Someone was cooking in the kitchen.

Mom? Dallion went forward. Mom? He entered the kitchen. There was someone at the stove, but it definitely wasnt his mother.

Dont forget about your promise, okay? A water-stone golem said, then flipped a cheese pancake. One must always keep a promise.

Okay. Dallion nodded.

Have you fully awakened?

Im not sure. Had he? It was difficult to say. He felt that he had, but he also felt there was something missing.

Better hurry up, then. I dont want to be stuck in the kitchen all day.

Sure. No problem. Can I have one of those? He pointed at the pile of cheese pancakes on the kitchen table.

No. Theyre for after you awaken.

Okay, then Ill

Awaken! The golem shouted.

Dallion jumped to his feet. His body was drenched in sweat. Breathing heavily, he looked around. He was in a simple room, one he hadnt seen before. Through the window, he could see the sun set over the village chiefs mansion.

So, it was a dream. He was still in the village. Strange that he would think of his life on Earth. Or rather, strange that he was only thinking about it now.

Glad youre up, a voice said behind him. It was his grandfather. Its time I told you a few

Chapter 30: Types of Awakening

Here, the elder put a bowl of freshly baked potatoes on the table. Your mother made these.

Dallion nodded while stuffing his face with the remaining few pieces of bread left. He had been gulping down food with the speed of a vacuum cleaner for the last ten minutes and was only able to reduce the craving. Up to today, the boy didnt think that such hunger was possible. The experience in the realm of the Well, though, had taken a lot from him.

She sends you her best, as do the rest of the family. The elder smiled. Try to chew better. Even awakened can choke.

Mhm. Dallion replied, reaching for the potatoes. In the past he had always hated them, but in this world they tasted like the best thing ever, and would even better if he had some salt and butter to add.

Youve increased your awakening level, havent you?

The question made Dallion freeze. Suddenly he felt full to the brim.

Dont worry, his grandfather smiled. Its a good thing. You couldnt have completed the well with just one skill. What level are you now?

Three. The boy leaned back, leaving a half-eaten potato on the plate in front of him.

Three. Not bad. The elder nodded a few times. Skills?

Guard and attack. There was a moments hesitation. I could have had forging. Dallion paused again. Why didnt you tell me about the tests? You knew what the village chief would do and still said nothing.

Didnt I?

Everything you and mother taught me were things that I already knew.

Strictly speaking, that wasnt true. His grandfather was the one to show him how to mend things and mentioned a few of the other skills in existence. As much as Dallion wanted to fault the old man, without his help, the boy would never have gotten used to his skills as he had. On the other hand, Gloria had helped him far more.

You didnt tell me about the awakening shrines or the Order of the Seven Moons, the boy continued. I dont even know what they are exactly. Just that aunt Vanessa wanted my parents to send me off in a monastery of theirs.

I can tell you now. The old man reached forward and took a potato from the bowl. Want to hear about the five basic types of awakening?

Yeah right. Dallion crossed his arms. Sure, go ahead. Dont let me stop you.

The first type of awakening is personal awakening. No one knows exactly why it takes place, but it is said that through luck, genetics, or intense training, one could achieve their first level. That is the key to unlocking your powerthe first step to your inner room. The more you improve, the larger your inner realm becomes. That was where you were offered your first skill.

Two, Dallion corrected. I was offered two.

I was offered three, the elder grunted. Doesnt matter because you can only choose one. Through that choice youre allowed to do other things, like awakening and mend items. Preferably small ones. That is the second type of awakening.

Im still waiting to hear something new.

Each time you awaken an item, the level of one skill increases. Also, if you're lucky, you can achieve unexpected feats, boosting your other stats. Have you done any of those?

A few. *So that's something rare.* What about the shrines?

The shrines are a shortcut. They allow you to undergo a personal awakening without actually doing it. Depending on the shrine, you can boost your awakening level to five, ten, or twenty. Provided you complete their trials.

Dallion leaned forward. Things were starting to get interesting.

The Order of the Seven Moons built them centuries ago. At one point there were lots of them scattered throughout the land, but with time less and less were maintained to the point they ceased to function. Most monasteries have them, but it takes years before a devotee could attempt to pass their trials. Also, they are almost always for internal use.

That was interesting. The one Gloria had shown him was a relic from the past. The shrine didn't look like a shrine in anything but name. What would it have been like centuries ago? Maybe the battle of the ogres was more than a myth and they were linked to the shrines' destruction? Lucky that the altar had somehow remained intact.

Just like standard personal awakening, there is no punishment for failure. If you don't succeed, you can always try again. That's not the case for item awakening. Fail there and your awakening is locked away for good. The elder sighed. And also worse.

Worse?

Failure doesn't destroy the mind or the body. All skills and abilities you have gained remain, however. They'll continue to help you in everyday life, but you'll never be able to awaken anything else. Each time you try you'll end up in your starting room, the doorway sealed off as a reminder of what could have been.

Chills went down Dallion's spine. He remembered how frightened and confused he was the first time he had appeared in the small dark room. Being condemned to be locked there each time you try to use a skill would probably be terrible.

You never explained that to me before

I'm explaining it to you, now, the elder sighed. The third basic type of awakening is area awakening. It's like awakening an item, but larger. Each item is its own realm.

Mending is different.

Mending is different. And so are the number of guardians. The larger the area, the more guardians. Defeating each one increases the level of one skill. The elder then peeled off the skin of the potato he was holding and slowly ate it.

And? Dallion said after a while.

And what?

Grandpa the boy sighed. Is that all? How can I invite someone to help me improve something? When do guardians give up? How do I leave an awakened realm without defeating the guardian?

Quite a lot of questions, the man laughed. Tell you what. Before I answer, how about you do something for me? Enter your awakening room and go as far as you can. Once you're done, come back here and I'll tell you everything I can.

That's it? It sounded suspiciously simple. What's the catch?

So young and so cynical. Just do it, alright?

Fine. Dallion stood up. How do I enter my room?

The same way you awaken everything else. Just think of yourself as an object.

Yeah, right. This is the stupidest thing I've found myself in a small room.