

# Leveling up the World

## Chapter 16: Village Bound

Sneaking back in proved much easier than sneaking out. The first thing that Dallion did was curse himself for closing the door in such a way so that the bar would bolt it from the inside. The second was to knock directly on it and wait for someone to open.

Dallions parents turned out to be sound sleepers, so it came to his younger brother to do the honors. The naivete with which the boy opened the door without even asking who was knocking, was borderline surreal. Back in his previous world, the first thing children were told was not to trust strangers, and definitely not answer the door when alone. The worst part was that according to Dallions memories, he had been no less trusting than his brother.

What are you doing up so early? Linner asked with a yawn, then rubbed his eyes.

I wanted to practice a bit.

Strictly speaking that wasnt a lie. Of course, he added nothing about Gloria, the shrine, or the fact that he had gained a second skill. Thinking about it still made Dallion slightly annoyed. If it wasnt for the village chiefs insecure pettiness, he could have had a rare crafting skill. Then again, if it hadnt been for that pettiness, he wouldnt have learned about the shrine in the first place.

Im going back to sleep, Linner grumbled half-asleep, then zombie off back in the house.

Dallion followed, closing the door behind him.

The bed felt scratchier than before. The cloth was rough, every wrinkle felt like a sliver of fabric biting into his skin, and the grains of dust felt like pebbles.

*Ive become like the princess with the hundred mattresses*, the boy said to himself, then shivered thinking what Gloria had been going through. No wonder she upgraded all her clothes. With the perception she had, normal clothes probably felt like wearing barbed wire.

Morning came at the worst possible time. Just as Dallion was starting to doze off, the sound of his family walking about the house made the task impossible. With a yawn and a sigh, he got up and went to get washed.

Breakfast was the first moment of dread that the boy faced. Fortunately, it turned out that his mothers cooking had become tastier than before. As the morning progressed, more people came to the house.

A few neighbors were the first to drop by. Cracking jokes as usual, they grabbed Dallions father for the start of their workday on the field. The usual gaggle of children soon followed. Too young to be given any real chores and too old to remain in the house, they spent several minutes staring at Dallion or the newly awakened, very much to Linn's pride. They rushed out to play with Dallion's brother. Lastly, elder Seene arrived.

Hello, grandpa. Dallion waved enthusiastically. This was the moment he'd been waiting for. It had finally come.

You're in a good mood today. The old man smiled as he made his way to the dining table. Is your training going well? I've been keeping an eye on him, Dallion's mother said, bringing a mug of steaming tea to the elder. The aroma was pleasant, although almost overwhelming. He's been doing fine. If the Seven are willing, he'll be ready for tomorrow.

That's all we can hope for. The elder put up a brave front, but Dallion could clearly see he was worried.

Grandpa, there's something I want to ask you. The boy leaned forward. Can you tell me something about the cities?

The cities?

Yeah. You mentioned that awakened with rare skills got to go there. I'm just curious what they are like.

This is quite sudden. His features moved into a deep frown. You've never been interested in that before.

I wasn't awakened before.

Right, right. For a moment it almost seemed that the question saddened Seene. Well, the cities are very different from everything you know. A lot of people are either awakened or related to one and everything is made to reflect it.

Are awakened a ruling class there?

Ruling class? The elder laughed. Yes and no. The noble running the city is always awakened, as are many of the nobles and guild masters. However, awakened also keep the city in order. Blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, even tailors can be awakened. In the cities even the gift isn't always a guarantee for success.

So, you've been in one?

Oh, yes. Many times. When I was young, I was much more reckless than I am now. I thought that I could make a name for myself there His daze drifted away, looking at something Dallion couldnt see. Youre thinking of going there, arent you?

It would have been easy to say yes. Dallion wanted very much to go there. If the city was even a fraction the way his grandfather described it, it would be much closer to the boys old home than this village. Although, why was everyone so terrified when given the prospect?

Im considering it. Dallion chose the diplomatic reply.

Considering is good. Just be sure thats what you really want to do. Sometimes people go to the cities and find they dont really want to be there. A miserable life awaits those

Everything suggested there was more to the story. The elder, however, chose not to continue. Finishing his drink, he stood up, gave Dallion a hearty tap on the shoulder, then left. It was almost as if he had guessed the boys next question and chosen to leave before he was asked to answer it. That created something of a problem for Dallion, since he had exhausted all his options. He could possibly try to ask the remaining village elders, or even people from the Luor family, yet something told him the result would likely be the same.

*Why doesnt anyone leave this village?* Dallion wondered. *Why didnt I want to leave it?*

It was said that an overabundance of coincidences always led to a hidden pattern. All one had to do was keep track, and eventually the truth would be uncovered. Until then, Dallion had another day of training before him.

## **Chapter 17: Personal Shrine Trial**

Increasing ones awakening status, as it turned out, had a considerable number of advantages. Apart from the improvements and the new skill Dallion had gained, he found that he could use his powers twice per day. Quite the welcome surprise, since it avoided him to explain what he had done that night. It also allowed him to improve things he wanted in secret.

The attack skill turned out to be exactly the way Dallion imagined it would be instead of green markers, he was presented with a series of red ones, suggesting where and how he would attack. More curious, the slightly heightened perception had caused weak spots and vulnerabilities to become visible on his enemy. Targeting one had resulted in instant defeat of the first guardian Dallion had faced. Only on the next, and final day before the trial, did he consciously try to avoid taking advantage of his skills in order to get some degree in training.

The whole experience had made the boy much more aware of how weak he actually was. Gloria, with her high perception and attack, would probably turn him into swiss

cheese, then start playing whack-a-mole with his inner organs afterwards. Guard skills and reflexes were a good counter, but at his low stamina, they were a limited resource.

An encounter with a cooking pot guardian had left Dallion drained to the extreme. Granted, he had received much praise and thanks from his entire family, and could rest assured the food quality would increase even more, but it didn't help change the fact he could barely crawl to his bed.

Another obvious change was that mending had become far easier and efficient. Labyrinth flaws had now become, for the most part, apparent, allowing the boy to fix several in one pass. In under two days he had managed to achieve more than he had in the previous five, not to mention he had returned to a few pesky items to complete the missing three percent that kept bugging him. If this were a game platform, he would have received a number of achievements by now. Secretly, he was still hoping he would. After all, actions in the awakened realm had provided him bonuses before.

Three hours before the day of his new trial, Dallion snuck out of his house once more. Being level two was nice, but if he managed to reach level three it would be better.

It wasn't difficult to find the shrine cave. Gloria had done a good job getting him there along a series of landmarks. Looking back, she had probably done so deliberately, knowing Dallion would sneak in again. Beneath her somewhat arrogant, and undeniably pretty, exterior she was actually quite nice. A pity she had explained so little about the shrines.

As Dallion put his hand on the altar, he closed his eyes, wishing that he'd be offered the forging skills once more. When he opened them, he was back in the plain of the shrine.

**You are in a small Awakening shrine.**

**Complete the trial to improve your destiny!**

So far everything had been the same, from the sky to the endless bare wasteland. At the same time, there were a few subtle details Dallion hadn't noticed before. The moons above were much brighter, faintly glowing in the sky. There were seven of them in total, all of various colors and sizes. The blue one was the largest, shining with an intensity equal to the one the boy remembered from earth. Most of the rest were pale blotches of color, and two were little more than a circle outline in a sky of white.

The columns also seemed more detailed, if identical. As Dallion took a step forward, an arch appeared. Two things instantly became apparent: the roman numeral one was clearly visible carved into the capstone, also the entire arch was filled up with a brick wall.

*Whats this?* Dallion approached and slid his fingers along the wall it was very real and very solid. Hitting it with his buckler yielded no results, forcing the boy to move toward the column to the right. As expected, a second archway appeared, this one also barred.

Fear crept in. Had Dallion gone through all this trouble for nothing? Possibly there was some other hidden requirement that Gloria hadn't mentioned. That could be why she was so careless when sharing the shrine's location.

Anxious, Dallion stepped to the right again. The moment he did, a wave of relief passed through him. The archway was there, unblocked, along with the number three roman numeral on top.

Phew. The boy whipped the seat off his forehead. There was a way to progress, after all.

Curious, he walked around the rest of the columns until all six archways appeared. There were six of them, each with a roman numeral. The first two were blocked, leaving Dallion to choose from three onwards. After his recent experience, he chose the third.

**Shrine trial 3 chosen!**

**Prepare for combat!**

Yeah, yeah. Dallion dismissed the rectangle. Once the novelty of awakening had worn off, the rectangles had become really old, really fast just like pop-ups.

Unlike last time, Darrion found himself on the beach of a tropical island. Blue sky and sea continued for as far as the eye could see. Behind him, a modest cluster of palm trees formed a jungle the same way they did in elementary school drawings. It was clear that the fighting would take place in water which wasn't that good.

Dallion loved to swim, but never was particularly good at it. Even when he'd gone to the pool as a teen, he always made sure to gravitate towards the shallow end.

Im here! Dallion shouted, still on the beach. He had no intention of stepping in. Im ready.

The guardians reaction was immediate. A fountain of water emerged from the endless sea. Dallion braced himself, buckler and short sword at the ready.

Hey! a cheerful voice said.

**SHRINE GUARDIAN**

**Species: SLIME**

**Class: WATER**

**Statistics: UNKNOWN**

**Skills:**

**Weak Spots: NONE**

### **Chapter 18: Endless Combo**

Fighting a creature with no weaknesses turned out less difficult than Dallion expected. Having to deal with a slime that shot bullets of water, though, was extremely annoying. The projectiles themselves weren't nearly destructive as the boy imagined. They didn't cut through objects, nor did they explode. What they did was smart like a baseball hitting the thigh.

One would have thought that a shield would be enough protection. While that was true at first, with each minute the impact pressure grew to the point that Dallion now felt pain in his arm each time something splashed on the shield. His physical weakness was starting to show. After defeating this guardian, he was definitely going to improve his body.

Red and green markers appeared and shifted constantly, like a Dance Dance Revolution on difficult mode. Following them for the most part wasn't an issue, but doing so on water often does. Logically there was no reason the boy shouldn't but his aversion to water made him stop each time breaking the sequence.

Several times he tried to bait the guardian further in the island, only to get bombarded by a volley of water projectiles as a result.

You really are annoying, you know that? Dallion grumbled under his breath.

Simple tricks weren't going to help him win this encounter so he resorted to the next best thing: brute force combinatorics. If there was one thing the arcane point-and-click adventure games had taught him, was that every puzzle could be solved by combining every item with every other. The trick was not to get hit too many times as he did it.

Forcing himself to walk into the water, Dallion completed a full guard sequence. When time slowed to a crawl, he didn't attack as he usually did, but waited for it to return to normal, then continued with a second sequence, and a third. Only when that bonus effect triggered did he go on the offensive.

Jumping to a perfect counterattack spot, a few series of markers appeared. Unlike the ones before they were half green half red. Both shield and sword markers were visible in the air, allowing him to perform several strikes on the slime. This was precisely the boost he needed.

How about this? Dallion attacked, slamming the guardian simultaneously with his buckler and the flat side of his sword.

## **COMBINATION ATTACK**

### **Dealt damage increased by 200%**

Metal splashed against water which unfortunately had the consistency of wet concrete causing the entire slime to jiggle.

The temptation to do another squish attack was enormous, but Dallion chose to continue as the markers suggested, twisting around the guardian and doing another slice attack. It was a good thing that he did. The attack didn't end, instead creating a new set of green-red markers, more elaborate than the last. When Dallion completed it with quite a bit of difficulty the same happened again.

*Endless combo*, the boy thought.

The third sequence proved too much, causing him to fumble half-way through. Not wanting to waste any of the time freeze, Dallion performed another dual attack. To his relief, it proved enough. The slime lost form pouring back into the endless sea. Moments later, a rectangle appeared.

### **You have broken through your third barrier.**

*No skill options?*

Regret twisted his stomach like a football during practice. It was too much to expect he'd be offered forging skills a second time, but he had hoped to receive something new.

### **You are Level 3**

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

The choices were all too familiar. Maybe for that reason Dallion found himself unable to make one. It was tempting to increase his Perception, especially now that he knew how it helped him in real life. Mind was something he didn't think about if there were any apparent benefits, he didn't feel them. Reaction, on the other hand, was something that would give him a definite edge. If anything, with a value of six was seen as impressive, having a stat on seven would be phenomenal. And then there was Body

Strictly speaking, it was the last thing Dallion wanted to improve. Being strong and muscular, while tempting, was something he thought he could achieve on his own. After all, he had managed to melt quite a lot of fat through item mending alone, not to mention that had also added a bit of muscle mass in a few areas. Was there really a need to invest in Body?



*What is the proper choice?*

Dallions father used to say that proper choice is the educated comparison of known results. The boy knew what all other statistics provided him, he only assumed that body would grant him more stamina.

Here goes. Dallion tapped the Body rectangle with his finger. Some things required decisiveness.

## **Awakening increased**

### **Your ATTACK skills have increased to 5**

The tropical island had vanished, replaced by the dark surroundings of the cave. Dallion remained there for a few minutes, thinking. Had he made the right choice? As far as he could tell, nothing had changed. He didnt feel stronger, norif his clothes were any indicationhad he become particularly more muscular. He could hope that the effects of the new increase would become apparent when facing a guardian. Or maybe there was another way. For that, though, he had to get back home.

The way back went unnoticeably fast. The only thing Dallion had to be careful of was not to be seen by anyonea surprisingly difficult task once he entered the village proper. While most of the people remained in their homes after dark, an alarming number would peek out of their windows at the least of noises. Lacking internet, television, or even books, there was little else to do to fight boredom. No doubt Dallions previous sneak outs had been seen and discussed already. Since everyone was secretly backing him against the village chief, they had probably kept the secret.

Dallion looked at the sky. As far as he could tell, about an hour remained till midnightperfect for his small test. Bending down, the boy took a chipped stone from the ground and used his awakening powers on it. A split second lateror half an hour in the awakened statethe stone had turned into flawlessly polished granite.

Cool. Dallion looked at the stone, then put it gently on the ground. The improvement hadnt been a mistake after all.

## **Chapter 19: The Second Task**

Everyone from the village had gathered to witness Dallions walk to the chiefs mansion. The atmosphere was noticeably different from last time. Then everyone had accepted the fact that hed lose his gift and had remained in their homes. Now there was hope he could actually stand up to the Luor family, something that no one had done in decades. Even the other village eldersawakened in their own right, some of which were in good relations with the chiefhad appeared to witness the spectacle.



The mansion guards, in contrast, were somber and silent. The duo from last time hurriedly escorted him through the inner courtyard, making sure to shut the door as quickly as possible behind him. Once inside, they were joined by another pair of distant Luor relations, who took him directly to the main hall.

Any idea what it'll be like? Dallion asked casually. It was a slightly cruel thing to do given the fear written on everyone else's face, but he couldn't resist. After all, it was a small payback for the way they had treated him and his family in the past.

The guards mumbled something beneath their noses. Most likely this is new to them as well. In the past awakened outside of the Luor family had only visited the mansion once.

The hall was as Dallion remembered it, though the people weren't. The chief's son and two oldest granddaughters weren't present. In their place there was a dry skinny man in his fifties, some woman in her thirties covered with a mask of makeup that Dallion vaguely recalled to be the chief's niece, and a child of five.

*So these are the Luor awakened,* Dallion thought.

There were no visible indications that they had the gift, but for those who knew where to look, the signs were everywhere. Apart from the aura of extreme confidence emanating from the people, none of their clothes were torn or dirty. The same could be said for every trinket, weapon, or piece of jewelry they had on them. Looking closer, Dallion noticed that Gloria's clothes while identical in design were now made of silk.

*You increased your perception again, didn't you?*

He smiled.

Well met again, Dallion the awakened. The chief smiled, leaning forward from his seat. You've caused quite a stir. It's not often that one gifted is so the old man rubbed his chin enthusiastic.

One might say my horizons been cleared in the past week.

Indeed, one might. The chief hissed, maintaining his smile. Which is why it is your duty to help the village. As you know, it's an awakened's task to help others. Without that help the village will crumble to dust and be swallowed by the wilderness.

*Wait, what?*

No one had told Dallion about this. Rather, everyone had been telling him since birth and yet his former self had never once thought about it seriously. Everyone in the village knew that to be fact, a truth so simple that even the children accepted: everything broke down and decayed. It was only awakened that could reverse the process. A village without awakened wasn't going to last long. Maybe it would survive a

few generations, more if it was a trading hub, or had a valuable resource to sell. Ultimately though, it was fated to disappear.

This village was no different. The chiefs mansion was an obvious example, but now that Dallion thought about it there were other vital buildings in perfect order. Although not flashy, the village mill was in good shape, as were the barns, the kennels, the single bridge over the river. So many things constantly maintained, that Dallion had taken for granted.

You want me to repair a house? Dallions face turned two shades paler.

A well, the old man let out a dry laugh. The square well. It has been a decade before anyone did. Your father was one of the people that repaired it a few years ago, but that wont be enough.

*A well? How do I repair a well?!*

Even at his current level, he could repair three stones at most. The well must have been composed of thousands. Attempting anything of the sort would take years.

Something wrong? The old man rubbed his hands.

Several members of his family were grinning. His grandson was the most egregious example, his expression screaming why dont you die already? Only Gloria looked away, choosing to avoid Dallions glance.

Werent you so full of energy just moments ago? The chief pressed on.

My awakening level doesnt allow me to mend all that. Maybe if I can help in some other

Of course, it doesnt. Thats why Ill help you. Aspion cracked his fingers. Ill open the awakened realm. All you have to do is mend the well. Simple, right?

Having never done it before, there was no way Dallion could say whether it was simple or not. If the chiefs past behavior was any indication, the difficulty would range from hard to impossible. Was that why he had gathered every awakened from his family? Dallions success last time had already created ripples in the village, ripples the old man very much needed to straighten if he were to retain his unopposed rule.

Sure. Dallion bluffed a smile on his face. As his best friend in high-school had said: when in doubt always act like an ass. When do we start?

We start immediately.

The village chief stood up. With the confidence of a king, the old man strode past Dallion and out of the hall. The rest of his family followed, acting as a sort of entourage.

Dallion too was forced to join in near the end. On the positive side, he was at least close to Gloria.

*Did you know about this?* He whispered the words with the faintest of breaths. No normal person would have been able to hear the words nor see his lips move. Someone with a perception of seven, though, did.

The girl gave him a silent nod. *Why didnt you warn me then?*

For a split-second Glorias face crumbled in sadness and shame. It lasted less than the blink of the eye, but enough for Dallion to get his answer: she had wanted to tell him, but something prevented her. Either the girl was a very good actress and had set him up, or he was going to have a long talk with her once this was over

## **Chapter 20: Within the Well**

When the village chief appeared from his mansion, the entire crowd fell into a subdued silence. While not imposing in figure, an invisible strength emanated from the old man crushing the spirits of everyone around. Almost immediately everyones glances fell to the ground. Even the Luor guards trailed a few steps back, trying to distance themselves from their leader.

The procession made its way to the side of the mansion, then continued towards the so-called village square. The place was a short distance away from Dallions house, providing water for most of the peoples washing and livestock needs. There were several smaller wells scattered throughout the village, though most of them were only full after a night of heavy rain. As most poorer families, Dallion got their water from the main well and the river outside the village, storing it in large water barrels near their home.

*How do you improve a well?* The boy wondered.

Back on earth hed never even seen a well outside of pictures. All he knew about water supply and plumbing was what number to call if something went wrong.

Looking forward to it? the village chief asked with sadistic glee. Everyones come out to follow your exploits, so better not disappoint them.

Thats a given. Dallion laughed. In his heart, though, he knew he was in deep crap.

Upon reaching the square, everyone but the chief stopped so suddenly that Dallion bumped into the person in front of him. Fortunately, the person in front of him was Gloria. Unfortunately, she didnt appreciate it one bit, giving him a discreet elbow in the stomach.

Everything alright? The chief casually glanced over his shoulder.

Fine. Dallion managed to say, fighting to keep a smile on his face. It wasn't that Gloria's elbow had caused a lot of pain. In fact, the shove felt more like a poke, but had caught him off guard hitting the precise spot to knock out his breath.

*Good thing I improved my body*, he thought. Even so, it was somewhat embarrassing that his improved mind, reaction, and perception had failed to keep him from bumping into Gloria in the first place.

Come along, Aspion ordered in a loud voice. The old man placed his left hand on the well, then extended his right behind him. Let's start this.

*That's how you invite friends*, Dallion thought. Gloria had done the same at the shrine. The only difference was that this wasn't a shrine, and her grandfather wasn't a friend.

Given the circumstances, the normal thing for a person to do was run far away. Dallion could forget about the challenge, the chief, the entire village and just head off into the wilderness. With his level of awakenedness he would definitely be accepted in a town or city, maybe hired as a guard of a travelling merchant. Instead, he made his way to the well and grabbed Aspion's hand.

**Area Awakening** The village square disappeared along with the well, the houses, and the crowd of people. Only Aspion remained in what was undoubtedly a very inhospitable place. The only things that remained were mountains, rocks, and rivers stretching for as far as the eye could see. Grey clouds blocked all but a few rays of light, making it feel like a winter afternoon.

**You are in the land of WELL.**

**Defeat the guardian to change the land's destiny.**

Surprised? Aspion sat on a nearby stone. Area awakening is different from normal awakening. Items have the challenge all set up for you. Here you have to build it yourself.

I have to build a labyrinth? Dallion arched a brow.

The question must have been delectably stupid, for the village chief rubbed his hands together with such an expression of joy that one would have thought he'd won the national lottery.

Yes, in a way, he said, struggling to keep a straight face. Actually, it was your grandfather who did that ages ago when we were both young. Since then all awakened have only maintained the well. But of course, nothing is stopping you to improve it to the next level.

The same old trap. In the future, maybe it would be a good idea if Dallion figured that out before stepping in.

What do I need to do? he looked in the distance. It didnt take long for him to notice that the large mountains formed a wall in the distance an unbreachable ring that surrounded everything with a smaller mountain as its center.

To mend the well, kill all the creatures that have infested it. To improve it, defeat the guardian on top of the mountain.

It sounded simple enough, which meant it probably wasnt. There had to be more. Of course, asking directly would either result in an outright lie or a hint so vague that it might as well be false.

What about you, respected chief? Dallion added as much sarcasm in his words as he could muster. The reaction on the old mans face, however, suggested it had come out as flattery.

Me? Aspion scratched his nose. Ill be waiting for you outside. He stood up. Oh, and dont worry. Take your time. After all, time only flows on the outside.

With a snap of his finger, the village chief disappeared. The moment he did, a green rectangle appeared in his place.

**ASPIRON LUOR has granted you the power to change the lands destiny.**

**Defeat the guardian to leave the land of WELL.**

The boy stared blankly. The chiefs action was utterly despicable and so predictable that Dallion was amazed he expected anything less. Of course the old man would leave him alone in this prison to fend for himself. The really scary part was that no one was going to notice unless Dallion completed the trial or was defeated and lost his awakening. He could stay here for months, even years, and not a second would pass for the village. As far as the crowd was concerned, he had just grabbed hold of the chiefs hand.

The land of Well, Dallion crossed his arms. I hope youre ready. Not only was he going to defeat all creatures and vanquish the guardian, but if it was in his power he was also going to add a the in front of Well.