

The Tide of Dreams

Training Day, Part 1

Luke woke up in a daze, face down on the ground. He stood up and dusted himself off, noticing that he was not wearing his jeans and t-shirt but an outfit similar to the one he wore during his first visit to the Dream Realm, only without the long jacket, a red shirt instead of white, and black gloves with red stripes following the bones in his hands from wrist to knuckles.

As his head cleared, Luke took in his surroundings. He realized that he was standing in the middle of a stadium. The ground level, where he stood, was about one hundred yards in diameter and covered in a thin layer of tan dirt, surrounded by a white wall that rose up ten feet, although Luke could only guess from where he stood. Behind the wall were row upon row of gray seats. Luke could not begin to imagine who this stadium may have seated. The entire stadium was the size of a professional football stadium, which is where Luke would have imagined he was had he not looked upward at the sky, if he could call it that, the spiraling tubes of the Tide bringing him back to his senses.

“Okay, so where the hell am I now?” he asked himself.

“This is the Arena,” Max's voice came from behind him. Luke's heart skipped a beat as he turned, not having expected a response. Max was walking toward him, in a similar outfit, with a blue shirt, and a glove on only his left hand. Elaine was a few steps behind him.

“Dude, what in the fuck?”

“What?”

“If you're going to knock me into another dimension, at least give me a damn warning.”

“Okay, fair enough.”

“So what's this 'arena' supposed to be?” Luke asked as he waved his hands around.

“This is the Guardians' training area, where we practice new skills, train new recruits, and what have you. And it's the only place in the Dream Realm without a link to the real world that is safe for us

Guardians.”

“Come again?”

“Don't worry about it, Luke,” Elaine said, wearing a yellow shirt, black leather boots and short skirt, and fingerless gloves. “It'll all be explained in time. But first and foremost, we need to get you combat ready.”

“How come nothing you say sounds fun?” Luke asked. “What am I gonna have to do? And it's going to hurt, won't it?”

“It's only four things,” Max said. “The Waker's Eye, energy control, awakening your weapon, and then some field training. We should be able to finish the first three in the next hour, and we'll do the field training tonight.”

“Oh joy,” Luke said with mock enthusiasm. “But will an hour be enough time?”

“Oh, it is,” Elaine said. “Time is distorted here. It's like when you take an hour long power nap and it felt like you slept for ten. When we do the field training, though, we'll be under real-time constraints.”

“Fine, then. Let's get to it. What's first?”

“The Waker's Eye,” Max said, “the only ability that you can use while awake. It allows us Guardians to see the dream creatures that have nearly completed the transfer over. It's handy for keeping track of potential troublemakers and getting a preemptive strike in. It's also pretty handy in combat. Now, Elaine's been talking about doing this all damn day, so she's going to activate you Eyes.”

“Come here,” she said as she walked toward him. When they were close enough, she grabbed the sides of Luke's head and leaned it down until she was looking at him face-to-face. “Now, look into my eyes, and don't look away.”

“Okay,” Luke said, enjoying being so close to Elaine. He stared into her eyes, and immediately began to feel calm. He watched as her bright brown eyes began to darken, eventually becoming a dull

red. He began to tense up as his own eyes began to burn.

“Elaine!” Luke said as he began to struggle, the burning intensifying but Luke being unable to close his eyes, look away, or break Elaine's grip.

“I know, Luke, almost done.”

Luke's eyes began to tear, and he felt as though his eyes were going to explode. Just as the pain reached the breaking point, Elaine let go, and Luke dropped to the ground, cursing and holding his hands over his eyes. As Luke yelled and cursed hoping the pain would subside, Elaine knelt down and held him.

“I know it hurts,” she said, “but this is the only way. I hope you don't hate me for this.

“It's okay,” Luke groaned, his voice muffled with his face buried in Elaine's chest. “I'm just glad the pain's going away and that I can see again.”

Elaine looked down at Luke, who was looking up at her with the same red eyes she had. She chuckled under her breath and said, “So what can you see?”

“Everything looks about the same. A little clearer, I guess. Except everything has a faint orange glow around it.”

“Then it worked,” Elaine said. “Anything made of dream energy, including us in this form, gives off an orange glow. Everything else has a blue outline. It's a nice way to differentiate between what's real and what's not.”

“You know,” Max said from behind the two, “you two look *so* cute together, but can we please move on?”

“Way to be a mood killer, man,” Luke said as he stood up, Elaine next to him.

“Then get a room,” Max said, which was met with a growl from Elaine. “Anyway, you might want to deactivate the Eyes. You feel the slight warm feeling on the sides of your eyes?”

“Yeah.”

“Focus on that feeling. It's like an on/off switch for the Eyes.”

Luke closed his eyes and focused on the warm spots on his eyes, and felt a cool feeling rush over his head. When he opened his eyes, everything was back to normal.

“Feel better?”

“Yeah, it does.”

“Don't worry,” Elaine said. “There won't be any pain the next time you use it. Just wait a little while for your eyes to settle.”

“That's good to know,” Luke said. “So what's next?”

“Energy control,” Max said. “Easy in theory, tougher in practice, so here's the deal. These bodies are made of dream energy, just like the creatures we fight, so we aren't completely bound by our natural physical limits. Or some of the laws of physics for that matter. In short, to an extent, if you can dream it, you can do it in these bodies. Normally, we boost our strength, running speed, and jump height by using the energy of our bodies as boosters. Of course, doing so drains our energy, much like running around tires out our real bodies. But before you learn all that, you need to learn some basic energy control, 'cause you got learn to walk before you can run.”

“You couldn't be more clichéd.”

“Whatever. Just watch.”

Max raised his hand out to his side, palm facing the wall. He took a breath, and a small ball of light formed just off his palm. It shuttered for a moment as it compacted, then fired forward, clearing the fifty yard distance in the blink of an eye, hitting the wall, and exploding. As the dust the explosion kicked up clear, a large black scorch mark was revealed on the wall.

“Fucking awesome!” Luke exclaimed.

“By the end of this exercise, you'll be able to do that too. But you need to learn to mold and control your energy first. Let's sit down.”

The three sat down, Max and Luke facing each other, cross-legged, Elaine next to Luke, legs off to the side, leaning on her right hand.

“Let's start with the basics, internal control. Mastering this is the first step in being able to boost your strength and do things that are otherwise physically impossible. Now close your eyes.”

“All right,” Luke said as he closed his eyes.

“Now, I want you to concentrate, feel inside yourself, and find your center. It should be around the stomach. It'll feel like... a ball of... something. It's different for everyone, but you'll know it when you feel it.”

Luke relaxed. He had never meditated before, so he wasn't completely sure, but he could feel warmth in the pit of his stomach.

“I think I found it. That or that chili dog I had for lunch.”

“Funny. If you have, try pulling at it. Bring some of it into your chest. I'd say, imagine that it's a ball of clay or something, if that helps.”

Luke could feel the ball of energy in his stomach, and with a simple thought, began to pull it upward, into his chest, which began to feel warm as well.

“Feels like when you drink something warm on a cold day.”

“Good, you've got the hang of it. That was the easiest part. Now, let's try something tougher. Try to pull only a small bit of energy out and into each limb. It's like molding the clay into a little clay person.”

“Okay, let's see if I can do this.”

Luke reached into the ball of energy. As he began to pull out the four energy strands he needed, the ball began to stretch, warming his upper body. The strands began to run into and down his arms and legs, where he held them as he pushed the center mass back into shape. Luke could already feel himself grow stronger, and was surprised at how easy it was to maintain the energy now that he had it the way

he wanted it.

“Done.”

“That was quick,” Elaine said. “It took me almost an hour to get it down. Well, an hour in the dream realm.”

“Good job, Luke,” Max said. “You've set up what we call the energy pipeline. Think of it as the main arteries for your energy supply. As long as you can maintain it, which is relatively easy, you can easily channel energy to you arms, legs, hands, and feet without having to stretch the flow all the way from your center outward. But enough of the technical stuff, let's get to the fun stuff.” Max stood up, the others following suit.

“Now, molding energy outside of your body is only slightly harder than doing it inside. It's a matter of controlling the flow as it exits the body. But with your energy control as high as it seems to be, that shouldn't be a problem. First, aim you hand *away* from us. I don't need to get blasted to kingdom come again.”

“What do you mean, ‘again’?” Luke asked as he raised his right hand and aimed out to his side.

“Elaine's first shot backfired. I was standing next to her and got hit too. Not happening again.”

Luke turned to ask Elaine for her opinion, but stopped when he noticed that she had taken several steps back.

“Really, Elaine? You don't trust me?”

“It's not that I don't trust you, just planning for the worst.”

Max sighed. “Okay, let's get this over with. Hopefully we'll all come out of this in one piece. Now, you already have energy reaching into your arms, so the simple part is sending more along the pipeline. As it reaches your hand, slow the flow down and let it come out slowly, forming it into a ball. If it comes out too fast, you'll lose control of it and, well, boom.”

Almost unconsciously, Luke felt his arm warm as energy flowed down it and into his hand. As it

began to leak out of his palm, he shaped it until he had a ball the size of a softball just a centimeter from his hand.

“Wow, that was easier than I thought it would be,” Luke said with a smile on his face.

“I don't think any Guardian I know has ever gone through basic this quickly,” Elaine said.

“Me either,” Max said. “And he managed to not blow us up, which is a plus. So I guess all that leaves is firing it. Just use some energy to push it forward.”

Luke took a deep breath, and then sent a small pulse of energy through his arm. When it hit the ball, it shot forward, hitting the wall and exploding.

“Easy, huh?” Max asked. “You've now mastered the basics of energy control, and you've learned the most basic of Guardian techniques, the energy shot. There are a lot of variants to that technique that we'll get to in time, but for now, we're moving on the last and most important bit of training you'll need.”

“Which is?”

“Awakening your weapon,” Elaine said as she walked next to Max. “A Guardian's greatest asset, you need to know how to get it into combat form from its basic form, like this.” She reached behind her back and pulled out the old piece of wood she had earlier. She held it in her left hand, perpendicular to the ground.

“This is the basic form, which is usually some piece of original weapon that has survived, like the grip of my bow. You'll see in a second.”

Elaine held her right hand as though she were holding a bow with the string pulled and said, “Dream Seeker, awaken!”

A bright yellow light engulfed Elaine's hand, extending upward and downward, a second light appearing on her back. The lights began to fade, and in Elaine's hand was a compound bow, about four feet in height. The limbs were black with “V”-shaped yellow strips that ran up the front and sides. The

body was a normal compound bow body, lightweight with a few holes cut into it. It had a camouflage design with black and yellow as opposed to green and brown. The string was pulled back and in Elaine's fingers. She brought her hand forward until the string was in its resting position. On her back was a black quiver with yellow bands around the top and bottom, and it was full of arrows.

“This is Dream Seeker's combat form. Cool, isn't it? ”

“Yeah,” Luke said.

“Check mine out,” Max said, raising his right arm across his chest, revealing the leather band he had shown Luke at school. “Dream Crusher, awaken!” Blue light encompassed Max's wrist, extending until it covered his hand entirely and down to cover his elbow. As the light faded, it revealed the eight sided shield. The main part was an inch thick, blue with a black rectangle in the middle. At each edge was a much thinner metal, silver, that was connected by a small piece of metal that went into the main part of the shield. The only section missing this metal border was the edge directly above where Max's hand was. Instead, there was a black metal hand guard that protected Max's fist where he held the shield, and the metal borders on the two adjacent edges extended forward instead of at the angle of the edge itself. The borders began to retract, until they met the main part of the shield, and it all looked like one piece of metal.

“Nice,” Luke said, “but how did those old relics get here?”

“The same way the Dream Weaver came on your first trip here,” Max said, “they followed us. They can hop realms like we can when we're in this form, so... yeah. The Dream Master tried to explain it to us a while back, but I didn't understand a word of it. Word of advice, don't bother asking how it works, just know that it works.”

“Yeah, you're much better off,” Elaine said. “Just so long as you know that you have the Dream Weaver with you, even now. It should be attached to your belt in the back.”

Luke had a look of confusion as he reached to the back of his belt and found the hilt there. He

was surprised that he hadn't noticed it until that point. He unhooked it from his belt and held it in front of him.

“So, ready to do this?” Max asked.

“Yep.”

“Okay. The weapon is an entity in and of itself. It has its own energy that it has accumulated from previous users, and in order for you to use it, you have to connect with it, and give it some of yours. Run a bit of energy into the sword and into its heart. The energies will sync, and it'll be under your command.”

Luke closed his eyes. As he reached for the sword's heart, he felt a burning presence, something dark and angry. He was slightly afraid of it, but reached out to it anyway. As he connected with the Dream Weaver, he could feel its energy seeping back into him, and with it, a feeling of control, that he could use the Dream Weaver like a veteran swordsman. The rush was intense.

The Dream Weaver was a part of Luke.

“Enjoy the rush?” Elaine asked.

“Yeah, wow!” Luke explained. “What was all that?”

“The Dream Weaver giving you a small bit of the power and information it holds. The better a Guardian you become, the more it will give. If it thinks you're unworthy of its power, it'll reject you.”

“Got it.”

“Then give it its first command. To awaken.”

Luke held the hilt out.

He said it calmly.

“Dream Weaver, awaken.”