

*Two swords, angled for slicing,
came whirring towards my chest.
My block was simple: a step of the
back leg, a shift of weight, my right
sword joining the left in front of
me, cutting side slanted down.
His blades hit mine. The impact
resonated through my arm bones.*

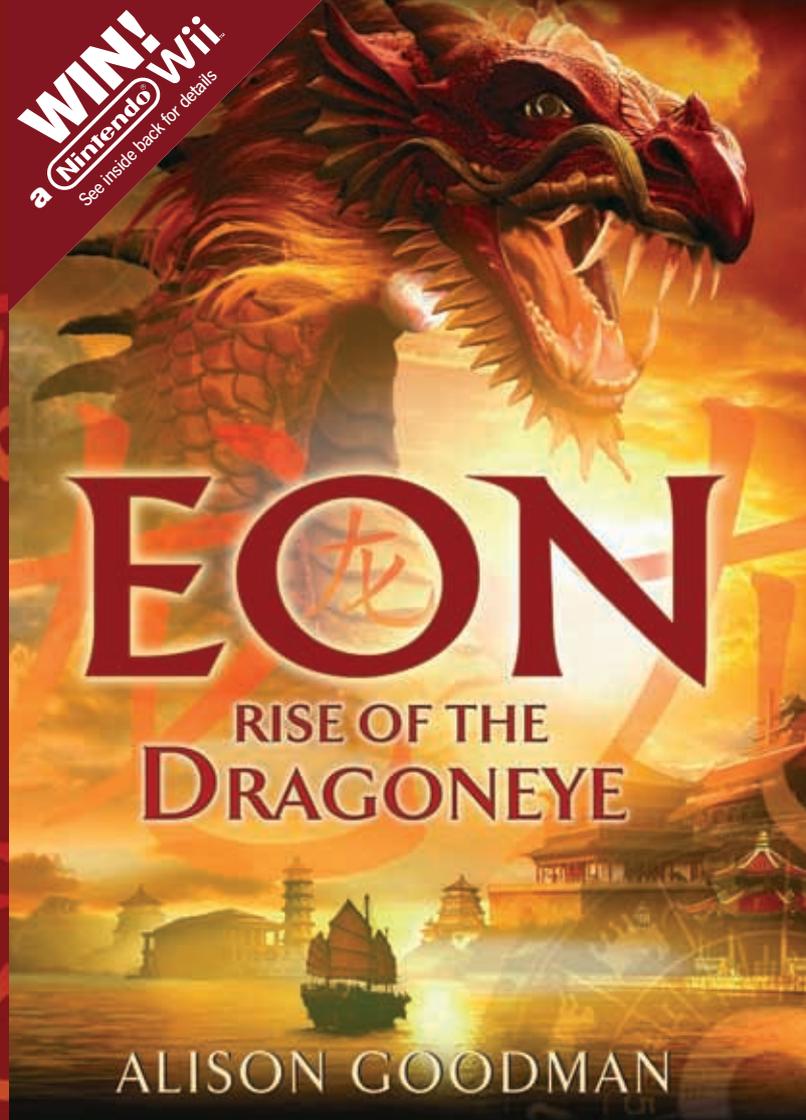
2009

THE YEAR OF THE
DRAGONEYE

01.01.09

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a Nintendo Wii™
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ALISON GOODMAN

FREE SAMPLER – NOT FOR RESALE

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CHAPTER I

I let the tips of both my swords dig into the sandy arena floor. It was the wrong move, but the dragging pain in my gut was pulling me into a crouch. I watched Swordmaster Ranne's bare feet shuffle forwards, rebalancing his weight for a sweep cut. Training with him always made my innards cramp with fear, but this was different. This was the bleeding pain. Had I miscounted the moon days?

'What are you doing, boy?' he said.

I looked up. Ranne was standing poised, both of his swords ready for the elegant cross cut that could have taken my head. His hands tightened around the hilts. I knew he wanted to follow through and rid the school of the cripple.

But he didn't dare.

'Are you spent already?' he demanded. 'That third form was even worse than usual.'

I shook my head, gritting my teeth against another clamping pain.

'It is nothing, Swordmaster.' I carefully straightened, keeping my swords down.

Ranne relaxed his stance and stepped back. 'You're not ready for the ceremony tomorrow,' he said. 'You'll never be ready. You can't even finish the approach sequence.'

He turned in a circle, glaring at the other candidates kneeling around the edge of the practice sand. 'This sequence must be flawless if you are to approach the mirrors. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Swordmaster,' eleven voices yelled.

'Please, if you allow, I'll try again,' I said. Another cramp twisted through my body but I didn't move.

'No, Eon-*jah*. Get back in the circle.'

I saw a ruffle of unease run through the other eleven candidates. Ranne had added *jah*, the old ward-evil, to my name. I bowed and

crossed my swords in salute, imagining the feel of driving both blades through his chest. Behind Ranne, the huge opaque form of the Tiger-Dragon uncoiled and stared at me. He always seemed to rouse with my anger. I focused on the Rabbit Dragon, bringing him into shimmering outline, hoping the smaller peacemaker would help calm my rage.

In the candidate circle, Dillon shifted and looked around the arena. Had he sensed the dragons? He was more aware than the other boys, but even he couldn't see an energy dragon without meditating for hours. I was the only candidate who could see all eleven dragons at will. It took deep concentration and left me weary, but it was the only thing that had made the last two years of training bearable. It was also the only thing that kept me from being killed.

'Get back in the circle. Now!' Ranne yelled.

I tensed and stepped back. Too fast. The sand shifted under my bad leg, wrenching it to the right. I hit the ground, hard. One heartbeat

of numbed shock then the pain came. Shoulder, hip, knee. My hip! Had I done more harm to my hip? I reached across my body, digging my fingers through skin and muscle to feel the malformed hipbone. No, there was no pain. It was whole. And the other aches were already fading.

Dillon shuffled forward on his knees, spraying sand into the air, his eyes wide with concern. Little fool — he would only make things worse.

‘Eon, are you...?’

‘Don’t break formation,’ Ranne snapped. He kicked at me. ‘Get up, Eon-*jah*. You’re an insult to the Dragoneye profession. Get up.’

I struggled onto my hands and knees, ready to roll if he kicked again. There was no blow. I grabbed my swords and pushed myself upright, another cramp catching me as I straightened. It wouldn’t be long now; I had to get back to my master, before the blood showed.

The half-hour bell had just rung. If Ranne gave me leave, I could get to the house and back

again by the full hour.

‘Swordmaster, may I withdraw from practice until the next bell?’ I asked. My head was respectfully bowed but I kept my eyes on Ranne’s blunt, stubborn features. He was probably born in an Ox year. Or maybe he was a Goat.

Ranne shrugged. ‘Return your swords to the armoury, Eon-*jah*, and don’t bother coming back. Another few hours of practice won’t improve your chances tomorrow.’ He turned his back, calling his favourite, Baret, to take my place on the sand. I was dismissed.

Dillon looked over at me, his soft face set into folds of worry. We were the weakest candidates: he was of age — twelve, like all the boys in the circle — but as small as an eight year old, and I was the cripple. In the past, we wouldn’t even have been considered as Dragoneye candidates. Neither of us was expected to be chosen by the Rat Dragon in the ceremony tomorrow. All the gambling rings had Dillon at a thirty to one chance. I was at a thousand to one. The odds may be against us,

but even the Council did not know how a dragon made its choice. We still had a chance. I pretended to yawn at Ranne's back, waiting for Dillon to smile. His mouth twitched up, but the lines of tension did not ease.

Another cramp dragged at my innards. I held my breath through it, then turned and walked carefully towards the small armoury building, my bad leg kicking up the fine sand. Dillon was right to be worried. Candidates no longer fought each other for the honour of approaching the mirrors, but we still had to prove our strength and stamina in the ceremonial sword sequences. At least Dillon could complete the approach sequence, even if it was poorly done. I had never once managed the intricate moves of the Mirror Dragon Third.

It was said it took a lot of physical and mental toughness to bargain with the energy dragons and manipulate the earth forces. It was even whispered among the candidates that a Dragoneye slowly gave up his own life force to a dragon in return for the ability to work the energies, and that the pact aged him beyond his

years. My master had been the Tiger Dragoneye during the last cycle and, by my reckoning, would only be a few years over forty. Yet he had the looks and bearing of an old man. Perhaps it was true — a Dragoneye did give up his own life force — or perhaps my master had aged under the strain of poverty and ill luck. He was risking everything for the chance of my success.

I looked over my shoulder. Ranne was watching Baret go through the first form. With all of the strong boys vying to serve him, would the Rat Dragon really choose a cripple like me? He was the Keeper of Ambition so perhaps he would not be attracted to physical prowess. I turned to the north-northeast and narrowed my mind, staring across the arena floor until I saw the Rat Dragon shimmer on the sand like a heat mirage. As though he was aware of my focus, the dragon arched his neck and shook out his thick mane.

If he did choose me, then I would hold status for twenty-four years: first working as apprentice to the existing Dragoneye and then, when he retired, working the energies myself. I

would earn a mountain of riches, even with the twenty per cent tithe to my master. No one would dare spit at me or make the ward-evil sign or turn their face away in disgust.

If he did not choose me, I would be lucky if my master kept me as a servant in his house. I would be like Chart, the slops boy, whose body was permanently twisted into a grim parody of laughter. Fourteen years ago, Chart was born to one of the unmarried maids, and although my master was sickened by the infant's straining deformity, he allowed it to live and stay within his household. Chart had never been beyond the confines of the servants' quarters, and he lived on a mat near the cooking stoves. If I failed tomorrow, I could only hope my master would show me similar mercy. Before he found me four years ago, I had laboured on a salt farm. I would rather share Chart's mat by the stoves than be returned to such misery.

I stopped walking and reached out further with my mind, pressing my energy-self against the Rat Dragon, trying to touch the mind of the

great beast. I felt his power spark through my body. Talk to me, I begged. Talk to me. Choose me tomorrow. Please, choose me tomorrow.

There was no response.

A dull pain in my temple sharpened into white agony. The effort to hold him in my sight was too great. The dragon slid beyond my mind's-eye, dragging my energy with it. I lurched forward, digging a sword into the sand to stop myself from falling. I leaned over the hilt and gasped for air. Fool! Would I never learn? A dragon only ever communicated with his Dragoneye and apprentice. I sucked in a deep breath and pulled the sword out of the ground. Why, then, could I see all eleven dragons? Why was I given such a gift in such an ill-favoured body?

It was a relief to step off the sand and onto the paving of the Armoury courtyard. The sharp cramps in my gut had finally smoothed into a dragging ache. Hian, the old master-armsman, was sitting on a box beside the armoury door polishing the furnace-black off a small dagger.

‘You been thrown out again?’ he asked as I passed him.

I stopped. Hian had never spoken to me before.

‘Yes, Armsmaster,’ I said, tucking my chin into a bow to wait out his scorn.

He held the dagger up in front of him and inspected the blade. ‘Far as I could see, you were doing all right.’

I looked up and met his eyes, the whites yellowed against his forge-reddened skin.

‘With that leg, you’re never going to get the Mirror Dragon Third sequence right,’ he said. ‘Try a Reverse Horse Dragon Second. There’s a precedent for it. Ranne should have told you.’

I kept my face expressionless but couldn’t help the skip of hope that caught in my throat. Was it true? But why was he telling me this? Maybe it was just a joke on the cripple.

He stood up, holding on to the door jamb to help him straighten. ‘I don’t blame your mistrust, boy. But you ask your master. He’s one of the best history-keepers around. He’ll

tell you I’m right.’

‘Yes, Armsmaster. Thank you.’

A loud yell made us both turn towards the candidates on the sand. Baret was on his knees in front of Ranne.

‘Swordmaster Louan was considered one of the best approach-ceremony instructors. It’s a pity he retired,’ Hian said flatly. ‘You got practice swords at home?’

I nodded.

‘Then practise the Reverse Second tonight. Before your cleansing ritual starts.’ He walked stiffly down the two steps then looked back at me. ‘And tell your master that old Hian sends his regards.’

I watched him walk slowly towards the gateway that led down to the forge, the distant clang of hammer on anvil drumming his progress. If he was right and I could replace the Mirror Dragon Third with a Reverse Horse Dragon Second, then I would have no difficulty finishing the approach sequence.

I stepped into the cool, dim armoury and waited for my eyes to adjust. There hadn’t been

a Mirror Dragon for three hundred years, so changing the approach sequence shouldn't make any difference. No dragon to be angered, no Dragoneye to be offended. Some of the more radical scholars had even suggested that the Mirror Dragon sequence be dropped from the ceremony altogether. But the Council ruled that the Dragon Dragon's place in the twelve should still be honoured. It was, after all, the symbol of the Emperor. And the old legends said that the Imperial family was descended from dragons and still had dragon blood flowing in its veins.

Hian was right: my master was a great history keeper. He would soon discover if the approach sequence could be changed. But first I had to tell him, a day before the ceremony, that I could not complete the Mirror Dragon form. I shivered, remembering the welts and bruises of his past displeasure. I knew it was desperation that provoked his hand — in the last ten years my master had trained six candidates and all of them had failed — but I did not look forward to his anger. I gripped the hilts of the swords more tightly. I had to know

if the Horse Dragon Second was allowed. It was my best chance. My master was not a fool, he would not beat me too hard before the ceremony. Too much rode upon it. And if his history scrolls agreed with Hian, I'd have at least four hours before the cleansing ritual to practise the new form and bridges. It was not long, but it should be enough. I raised the swords in the overhead cut that started the Reverse Second and sliced the left sword down shallowly, conscious of the limited space.

'Oy, don't fling those around in here,' the duty armsman snapped.

I pulled up, dropping the points of the swords.

'My apologies, Armsman,' I said quickly. It was the skinny, sallow one who liked giving lectures. I held out the two hilts to him, angling the blades towards my body. I saw his hand clench briefly into the ward-evil sign before he took the swords.

'Any damage?' he asked, holding one out flat to check the steel.

'No, Armsman.'

‘These are expensive tools, you know, not playthings. You have to treat them with respect. Not hack away with them indoors. If everyone...’

‘Thank you, Armsman,’ I said, backing towards the door before he could go into a full tirade. He was still talking as I cleared the steps.

The easiest way out of the school was back across the arena and through the main gate, but I didn’t want to walk over the sand again, or draw the attention of Ranne. Instead, I took the steep path down to the school’s southern gate. My left hip ached from the strain of the practice session and the cramping in my gut made me breathless. By the time I reached the south gate and was passed through by the bored guard, I was sweating from the effort of not crying out.

A dozen or so house-shops lined the road behind the school, forming the outer edge of the food market. The smell of roasting pork fat and crispy-skinned duck oiled the air. I leaned against the wall of the school, letting the stone cool my back, and watched a girl in the blue

gown of a kitchen maid weave through the tight knots of gossiping marketers and pause at the hatch of the pork-seller. She was about sixteen — my true age — and her dark hair was scraped back into the looped braid of ‘unmarried girl’. I touched the end of my short queue of black hair; the candidate length. If I was chosen tomorrow, I would begin to grow it to my waist until I could bind it into the double-looped queue of the Dragoneye.

The girl, keeping her eyes down, pointed at a cured haunch on display. The young apprentice wrapped the meat in a cloth and placed it on the bench. The girl waited until he had stepped back before laying the coin beside it and picking up the package. No conversation, no eye contact, no touching; it was all very proper. Yet I sensed something between them.

I narrowed my eyes, focusing as I did with the dragons. It had never really worked on people before and, at first, there was nothing. Then I felt a strange shift in my mind’s-eye, as though I was stepping closer, and a surge of orange energy flared between them, swirling

around their bodies like a small monsoon. I dropped my gaze to the ground, feeling like a trespasser, and blinked away my mind-sight. When I looked back, she was already turning to leave. There was no sign of the energy around them. No sign of the pulsing brightness that had left a searing after-image in my mind. A rushing heat prickled through my body. What did this new mind-sight mean? Why could I suddenly see such intimate energy?

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What is the name of the old master-armsman?

- A. Ranne**
- B. Hian**
- C. Eon**

Competition terms and conditions apply, see www.eon-dragoneye.co.uk for details. Closing date for entries: 31.01.09