

Rise of the Dragon Moon Cover Reveal: Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

A year had passed, but the nightmare began the same way it always did. Princess Anatolia crouched, hidden in the icy shadow of the Southern Wall, panting through the waves of fear that threatened to cloud her vision. A hundred yards out from the wall, the hunters stood in a line, their backs turned to their homes, as the two dragons swept down, wind rippling across their feathered wings. None of the hunters had fought a dragon. Not ever—yet every thump of Toli’s heart told her the hunters would all give their last breath to defend the Queendom of Gall.

Her father stood in the front, lifting his sword. Her blood raced as she ran, not away as she should have, but toward him, with a blade in her hand.

The memory—for that’s what it was, played out in hazy flashes as dreams do. His face as he turned to look. The whites of his eyes as he saw her coming. The sound of her fur-wrapped feet pounding the snow. The dragon’s scales glinting in Father Moon’s green light as it tipped its wing, and dived toward her father. The creature’s amused voice, like the deep knocking of the ice, as it called out to its partner, then changed

course, turning toward her with deadly grace. Her father's shout.

A single talon was half as tall as her, and just as it had happened in life, she saw the dragon's tail coming, too fast, too huge. She took the impact in her gut and ribs, flying backward to smash into the cold, hard wall.

Then—waking, at the foot of the wall, so cold, in a pile of snow and broken ice, her heart still beating like the heels of a hare, and knowing with the certainty of the ice that her father was dead. Gone forever, because of her.

A fissure opened in the ground to swallow her.

She woke.

Sometimes she would lie frozen in bed, willing her lungs to breathe and her heart to beat. The helplessness sometimes stayed with her for days, even weeks.

Not this time. This time, she woke restless, and late for the hunt.

Anatolia's body hugged the ice, the cold biting against her skin, despite the layers of fur and leatherleaf. Her numb face hovered just over the surface, her auburn braids like ropes holding down her gloved hands. Though her fingers ached to move, she didn't dare. To be a true child of the ice—a daughter of Ire and a princess of Gall—she must be still, indistinguishable from the miles of frozen wasteland around her.

She resolved to be as silent as the sky.

Toli squinted against the glare of Nya-daughter-moon's light, gleaming against patches of ice. Far away, and very high up, she made out the dim dot of the almost useless sun. At her side, Sigrid Spar, the Queendom's hunting master, was so motionless she might have been carved from the ice itself. Toli had the fleeting thought that Spar's heart could stop, and there would be no sign. Everything about her mentor was powerful,

from her above-average height to the way her heels hit the ice when she walked—as if she had already reached her destination the moment she took her first step, and crossing the space in between was just an inconvenience. Every movement Spar made was a required one. Every word was efficient.

Toli's stomach growled. She flicked her eyes toward her mentor, a sigh escaping before she could stop it.

“Be still,” the huntress breathed.

“What if they don't come?”

“They'll come. And if you want your Queendom to have fresh food for the table tonight, we must stay low to the ice no matter how cold you become.”

“I'll only let the palest thread of air across my lips,” Toli whispered, allowing herself the teasing echo of her stern mentor's teachings.

Spar's mouth hardened, the burn scars that covered half her face darkening. “You are too young for this.”

A warm flush raced to Toli's cheeks, despite the cold. She should have known it was the wrong time for teasing. There was no right time to tease Spar.

“When does the ice forgive?”

Toli didn't hesitate, answering with the certainness of experience. “The ice never forgives.”

“When does the ice forget?”

“The ice never forgets.”

“Will you bend the ice's will?”

“It cannot bend. You will break trying.”

“Correct. A child of Gall is a child of the ice. You must be centered and certain before taking any action—even a breath. We stalk a herd of thousand-pound creatures. At this time of year, with the dragon-waking so close, their instinct is to run. To get a kill, you must be sure and swift, but sureness in every movement must come before speed. Think before every motion—before each breath.”

“I’m sorry. I know. The bison are—”

Spar’s dark eyes flashed. “Fast. And sure. And skittish.”

Toli fell quiet, fighting against the wave of shivers that gathered at her back. It would only prove her mentor right.

The dragons’ yearly tithe—usually the last kill of the year—lay frozen in a storage outbuilding. It was a blessing from Nya herself that the bison herd passed the Queendom again before the dragons woke and the herds went to ground for three months, hiding themselves away, deep in the stonetree forest. Food was scarce, and they would need all they could get, so Spar had gathered them for one last hunt.

Beyond the need for food, and beyond the hope that she could grow to walk her father’s path as a hunter, Toli had an even more important reason to hunt. It moved through her like wind howling. She must be ready to defend her little sister, Petal, and the rest of the Queendom against dragon attack, and to do that, she had to earn Spar’s respect. She would never let them take someone she loved again.

Toli let her eyes rise toward Nya, glaring as if she could will the daughter-moon to stay up awhile longer. In this season she would only cast her light for about six hours a day, rising late and setting early, and she was halfway through her rise. *Hailfire*. If the herd didn’t show up soon, they’d be out of time. Once Nya set, the wind would rise, and

the cold would be too intense to hunt, even for Spar.

The sudden imagined scent of meat roasting on the hearth, the fat dripping and sizzling on the fire, was so strong it made Toli's mouth water. She squinted against the glare of moonlight on ice and wondered if Wix and the other hunters were having better luck, hunkering somewhere to the east.

A smirk played at the corner of her mouth. Wix had even more trouble holding still than she did. He *was* a better shot though. She stared across the ice to where the fog billowed, rolling like steam across the surface of a stew pot. If the others spotted the herd first, Wix might get a chance to try his hand, if Pendar was feeling generous, that is. Then again, Pendar didn't like to take any chances when it came to putting food on his plate.

Pendar's wide bulk and steady gaze might intimidate a stranger, but in truth he wasn't just one of the best hunters in Gall, he was also one of the most tenderhearted. He had a contagious laugh and crinkles at the corners of his eyes that were so deep you could practically fall into them.

Still, if it wasn't Spar who spotted the herd of bison in the fog, it was more likely to be Luca. She had the sharpest eyes—almost as sharp as her tongue—and if Wix did anything to ruin the hunt, the sinewy blonde would be furious.

Toli cringed inside, remembering how just that morning she and Wix had begged to come along on the hunt.

"Twelve is old enough," Pendar had said, wiping ice root from his wiry black beard and clapping Spar on the back. "She's a Strongarm, after all." His eyes twinkled against his warm brown skin.

Spar had crossed her arms and scowled. "And if the princess—heir to the

throne—is killed?”

Toli twisted the end of one of her braids in a freckled hand as she and Wix waited for the verdict.

“That’d go over well,” Luca snorted, whipping her long blond braid over her shoulder.

Pendar shrugged. “You know the princess is hail-bent on fighting dragons, ever since her father died. Should the need arise,” he hastened to add. “Hunting bison is a baby step. We just need to be sure nothing goes wrong.” He met Spar’s amber eyes. “You know the queen wants more trained. We need all the dragon-blasted hunters we can get.”

Spar stilled.

Pendar must have been hungry, or distracted, or both. People didn’t often forget that Sigrid Spar was the only person in the Queendom to survive an actual dragon blast. The burns covering half the hunt master’s face, neck, and right arm, all the way down to the tips of her fingers didn’t let them.

Pendar sputtered, his eyes flicking to Spar’s face. “Sorry,” Pendar mumbled. “It’s true though.”

A moment more passed before Spar cleared her throat to acknowledge his words. “I know it, but *you* know that however badly we might need more hunters trained, the queen’s feelings about training *her daughter* are complicated.”

A gust of biting wind hurtled past, tearing Toli from her memories. Below her feet, the ice spoke its mind in groans and knocks like a living thing, full of complaints and opinions. From the corner of her eye, she saw Spar’s attention sharpen. Low fog drifted over the surface of the ice, glowing in Nya’s light.

Then she saw them, and her mouth ran dry.

They were about five hundred yards away, and as the herd of gray-white bison appeared, the steam of their breath gusted into the swirling fog, covering their faces. They moved slowly, dipping their jaw-horns to scratch out the green mats of maka just within the top layer of the ice. Toli's mouth puckered just thinking of the bitter taste. For people, maka was starvation food, nutritious but impossible to make taste good.

The bison's bodies might be mistaken for chunks of ice, or stone, if stone weren't so rare, and if it weren't for the gleam of Nya's light against their white horns as they shifted their weight.

Toli's heart pounded like hooves. She held her breath, trying to calm her pulse. If she gave them away, Spar would never forgive her, and everyone would have to eat dried meat and mushrooms for the next six weeks, and hope it was enough.

In front of her, Spar slid forward across the ice, just under the layer of fog. Tiny swirls in the air were all that marked her passage. Luca appeared, sliding up next to Toli. She tipped her chin, her eyes widening, as if to say, "What are you waiting for?"

The bison had poor vision, but an excellent sense of smell. A bull might stand five feet tall, and their first instinct, if they sensed anything was off, would be to run to the forest's edge—straight through anything in their way, including a team of hunters. One well-placed kick could crush bone, and at this time of year, if even one startled, the whole herd would follow. They were always skittish before the dragons woke.

Worse, they might keep running and go to ground in the forest. After today, there would be no more hunting for months. It was too close to the dragons' waking, and nothing was safe with them hunting the ice.

The cold burned as Toli allowed herself a long, slow breath. Her auburn braids dragged over the ice as she dug in her toes and pushed, using the tips of her fingers to pull herself forward across the surface. Luca had disappeared in the fog to her left. Pendar would be somewhere to her right. She caught sight of Spar's feet, and, careful not to move too quickly, crept to her mentor's side.

The skin around Spar's dark eyes had gone tight—the telltale sign that her burns were bothering her again—, as they often did out on the ice, but Toli didn't let on that she'd noticed. She'd made the mistake of asking about Spar's headaches only once, and had nearly lost her own head as a result.

Spar's eyes gleamed as she turned her face to Toli, her voice so quiet Toli could have convinced herself it was her imagination, except the huntress was looking right at her, and her lips were moving.

“Prepare as I told you.”

Toli froze. “Me?”

Spar's eyebrows moved toward her hairline.

Several moments passed as Toli tried to remember her training over the babble of her thoughts. *Come on, Toli. You've waited a year for this.* A crease had begun to form across Spar's forehead by the time she gave her teacher a stiff nod.

She slipped off her gloves, the freckles on her pale hands dark against the ice. *Which one?* Toli wondered, turning her gaze to the bison. The females and the young would be deep inside the herd. She didn't need to worry about hitting one of them. Few things were as important as feeding her family and her people, but that didn't mean she enjoyed this part. A baby step, Pendar had called it, for someone who dreamed of

opposing dragons. She looked over the herd of bison for one that was big, but older, or injured—weaker.

A large bull, his horns gray with age and his back leg stiff from some old injury, stood scraping the ice just outside the fog line. Toli steeled herself.

He's had his time. If I don't take him, the dragons will—or the ice. She lifted a bone-tipped arrow from the quiver at her side, moving to place it in the bow on the ice in front of her.

Quick and quiet as a dragon's wings, she rose into a crouch and sent her arrow flying through the air. She aimed a little high, knowing that the twang of the arrow leaving her bow would reach the bull before the arrow itself. "Sorry," she mouthed with numb lips.

She couldn't see well in the dim, but she imagined the bison as he startled.

The soft thud of his body hitting the ice never came. Her stomach fell as his sharp alarm bellow echoed across the ice. After that, the only sound was the pounding of hooves thundering toward them.