

CLARE BELL

RATHA'S CREATURE



THE FIRST BOOK OF THE NAMED

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CREATURE

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THE FIRST BOOK OF THE NAMED

CLARE BELL



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Dedication

TO ANDRE NORTON,
who loves furred folk

TO M. COLEMAN EASTON,
who has been my critic, my friend, and more



CHAPTER ONE

Ratha leaped over a fern thicket and dug her paws into the spongy ground as she dodged sharp horns. One prong sifted through her fur and she skittered away from the beast. She turned and stood her ground with hunched shoulders and twitching tail. Her quarry advanced. A two-pronged horn on the stag's nose joined the crown of points on the head and it lowered the entire array, charging at Ratha. She launched herself at the deer, both front paws spread. She landed on her rear paws and bounced sideways as the multi-horn pivoted heavily, trying to catch her on its spikes and pin her to the ground.

Each time the horns came near her, Ratha jumped sideways, forcing the stag to turn in a tight circle, unable to build up any speed or momentum. After several such circles, the beast's knees were trembling and Ratha smelled the sweat that was darkening the coarse, gray-tipped coat. At last the

animal stopped and lifted its head. Wary brown eyes studied Ratha from behind the forked nose horn as she planted all four feet in the mossy soil beneath the trees, still but tensed, ready to spring if the deer lunged again.

The beast danced uneasily on its slender legs, sweating and snorting, turning one eye and then the other on Ratha. She knew that it had no experience with those of the clan. Most meat-eaters the three-horn encountered would tuck their tails between their legs when that fierce spiked crown turned their way. The fanged ones would run, not bounce around in circles. The stag's eyes were angry and the beast lowered its crown and pawed the soil, but the rage in its eyes was dulled by fear.

Ratha fixed her eyes on those of the deer. Slowly, deliberately, she walked toward it. Still tossing its head, the stag backed away from her. Ratha felt the intensity of her stare as she watched the beast retreat, and a feeling of triumph began to grow as she placed one paw after another on the multi-horn's reversed tracks and smelled the creature's bewilderment. She moved from one side to the other, blocking any attempts it might make to get past her. At last, she told herself, she had mastered the skill. At last the weeks of practice would yield results. Thakur's whiskers would bristle with pride.

A dragonfly buzzed across Ratha's nose, its iridescence stealing her attention from her quarry. The stag bellowed. Ratha jerked her head around, but she had barely time to realize she had lost control before the beast was on top of her,

striking out with sharp hooves and goring the dirt with its horns.

Ratha fled, tucking her tail and squalling. The stag chased her and they ran a frantic race through the trees. Ratha glanced back as her paws slipped and skidded on pine needles and saw the points just behind her tail.

“Up a tree, yearling!” a voice yowled on her left, and with one bound, Ratha was halfway up a young pine, beyond reach of the tossing horns. She climbed higher, showering her opponent with bark and stinging wood ants. “Thakur!” she wailed.

A copper-brown head appeared through a clump of curled ferns. Thakur looked up at Ratha and down at the stag. He gathered himself and sprang onto the animal's back. He flung his powerful forelegs around the three-horn's neck and dug his rear claws into its back as it plunged and screamed. As Ratha watched from above, he twisted his head sideways and drove his fangs into the stag's nape behind the head. Ratha saw his jaw muscles bunch in his cheeks and temples as blood streamed down the stag's neck, and she heard the sound of teeth grinding on bone. His jaws strained and closed. The stag toppled over, its neck broken.

Thakur paced around his prey as it kicked and twitched. Then he stopped, his sides still heaving, and looked up at Ratha.

“Are you any better at climbing down from trees than you are at stalking three-horns?”

Ratha felt her hackles rising. “Yarr! That buzz-fly flew in front of my nose! Didn’t you see?” She turned herself around and started to back down the tree.

“The last time, you were startled by a mud-croaker. If you can’t keep your mind on what you are doing, yearling, go back to Fessran and her dapplebacks.”

The cub dropped the rest of the way and landed beside him. She turned her head and nosed along her back. That prong had come close to her skin.

“Never mind a few tufts of fur,” Thakur said crossly.

“I don’t mind losing cub fur.” Ratha smoothed her coat, now turning fawn but still faintly spotted. She lifted her head and stared defiantly at Thakur. “I was close, wasn’t I? If I hadn’t looked away, he would have been on his way to the herd.”

“Yes, you were close,” Thakur admitted. “Your stare is good; I see you have worked on it. Now you must learn to let nothing distract you. Once you have the animal’s eye, don’t lose it. Make them fear you and make that fear paralyze them until they cannot disobey you.” He looked at the fallen stag, lying still in a patch of sunlight. His whiskers twitched with what Ratha knew was annoyance. “I didn’t want to kill that one. He would have given the does many strong young.”

“Why did you kill him? The clan has meat.”

“It wasn’t for meat.” Thakur stared at Ratha and she noticed a slight acrid tang in his smell, telling her he was irritated. “Nor was it to spare you. I could have chased him to

the herd. He broke your stare, Ratha. He learned that he did not need to fear you and that you feared him. Beasts that know that kill herders.”

“Why must we have three-horns in the herd?” Ratha grumbled. “They’re hard to manage. They fight among themselves and bully the other animals.”

“They are larger and yield more meat. They have more young. And,” Thakur added, “they are harder for the raiders to kill and drag away.”

Ratha trotted over and sniffed the stag, filling her nose with its musky aroma. Her belly growled. She felt a firm paw pushing her away. “No, yearling. Meoran will be displeased enough that I killed the beast. He will be further angered if any fangs touch it before his.”

Ratha helped Thakur drag the carcass out of the sun and brushed away the flies. Her belly rumbled again. Thakur heard it and grinned at her. “Patience, yearling. You’ll eat tonight.”

“If Meoran and the others leave anything but hide and bones,” Ratha complained. “There is never enough meat at the clan kill, and I have to wait until those even younger than I have filled their bellies.”

“How do you know they are younger?” Thakur said as Ratha took one last hungry look at the kill. “Cherfan’s spots are no darker than yours.”

“Arr. Cherfan ate before I did last night and I know his litter came after mine, Thakur Torn-Claw. I am older, yet he eats first.”

Thakur soothed her. “Your spots are just taking a long time to fade. You are too impatient, yearling. Two seasons ago, I ate last and often went hungry. It was hard for me then and I know it is hard for you now, but it will change.”

Ratha twitched one ear. “Shall I try the three-horn again? Maybe a doe would be easier than a stag.”

Thakur squinted up through the trees. “The sun is starting to fall. By the time we find one, Yaran will be looking for you.”

Her whiskers went back. “Arr, the old roarer. Hasn’t he enough cubs to look after that he must worry about me?” She snorted, thinking about her lair-father. Yaran had a harsh, gravelly voice and no inhibitions about speaking his mind. She knew that had his brother Meoran not been the firstborn, Yaran would have been clan leader and, she admitted, perhaps a better one than Meoran. He was kind to her in his rough way, but he would stand no nonsense from cubs.

“We have time left for some practice, Ratha,” Thakur said, regaining her attention. “I noticed that your spring was too high and that midair twist needs improving.”

He started her practicing dodges, turns and springs. After watching and commenting on her technique, he assumed the part of a wayward herdbeast while Ratha used her training to capture him and force him to the herd.

As Thakur watched the lithe muscled form darting and turning in front of him, he remembered how hard he had argued with her lair-father about training her in the art of herding.

"She is quick, she is strong, she can outsmart most of the cubs born before her," he'd told Yaran as the two stood together in almost the same place as he was now, watching Yaran's small daughter chase a young dappleback. "Look how she runs that little animal and has no fear of it. Not to train her, Yaran, would be a waste and the clan can't waste ability like hers."

"True, three-year-old," Yaran rumbled, swishing his gray tail. "She is strong and she is strong of mind. It is already difficult to make her obey, and I fear that training her as you suggest would make her less tractable than she is now. And less easy for me to find her a mate."

Thakur remembered arguing until his tongue was tired and then going to old Baire, who was then leader, taking Ratha along. Baire saw the cub's talent and overruled Yaran. Thakur was allowed to teach her his skill. He and Yaran exchanged few words these days, but that loss was small in comparison to Ratha's gain.

The cub sprinted back and forth in the grass, the afternoon sun turning her fawn coat to gold. Soon her spots would be gone and she would no longer be a cub. Her spirit challenged him and sometimes frustrated him, but he never tried to break it as he knew Yaran had. And, although he would scarcely admit it to himself, in the back of his mind was the hope that when she grew old enough for a mate, she might take him, even though his family and age placed him low in comparison to the clan status of other males Yaran might choose for her.

Thakur raised his chin and scratched at a flea behind his

ear. "Despite what I say sometimes, yearling, I have no regrets about choosing you to train. You are good, Ratha, in spite of your mistakes. When I have finished training you, you will be the best herder in the clan." He paused. "I don't often praise you, yearling. Perhaps I should." He roused the flea and lay down again. "Here is something that will please you more than words. I want you to stand guard with me and the other herders tonight."

Ratha sat up, her whiskers quivering. "Can I? Will Meoran let me? He needs the best herders of the clan."

"I told him that you are good enough. Meoran may think little of me in other ways, but when I speak about herding, he listens. Do you want to come?"

Ratha swallowed. "Will there be fighting?"

"If there is, you will keep out of it. Do you want to come with me tonight?"

"Yes!"

"Good." Thakur got up and stretched, spreading his pads against the ground. "Help me drag this kill to the dens and I will see that you get enough to eat this evening. The clan cannot let those who guard the herds against the Un-Named grow weak from hunger."

"Will the raid come tonight?" Ratha asked, pacing alongside her teacher.

"Meoran thinks it will. He has scouts watching the Un-Named."

"I've seen them a few times. They hide behind trees or

crouch in the shadows. They watch us just as we watch them.” Ratha trotted to match Thakur’s longer stride. “I’ve often wondered who they are and why they are without names.”

“Perhaps you will learn tonight, yearling,” he answered.

They reached the stag’s carcass. Thakur pushed one stiff foreleg aside and seized the neck while Ratha grabbed the rear leg by the hock. Together they lifted the kill and carried it away through the trees.