



## CHAPTER 1

A shiver of excitement went through Ratha. She began her stalk, belly fur brushing the ground. Grass whispered past her legs as she felt the slow, controlled power of each muscle. Her tailtip tingled with the urge to twitch, but she held it still.

The horse the Named called a striper tossed its head and flapped its tail, eyes widening. Ratha slowed her downwind stalk so that she seemed nearly frozen, yet was still moving. The striper swung its neck around, jerking its head and ears back.

Ratha stilled until the herdbeast settled, then quickened her stalk, easing her weight from one foot to the next, placing each directly ahead of the one behind and moving so smoothly she felt as though she were flowing across and through the grass, a green-eyed river of tawny gold.

Nearing the striper's dancing rear hooves, inhaling its sweat-sharpened scent, Ratha trembled with the impulse to dash, spring, and wrestle her prey to the ground. She took a long slow breath—as the herding teacher, Thakur, had taught her—mastered her urge, and crept around the striper, circling in front of it.

Stripers were new to the Named herds. This horse was dun, with dark brown mane and tail. Ratha turned her head to bring her gaze down along its banded forelegs to the three-toed feet. These feet differed from those of the smaller dappleback horses that the clan had long tended. The striper's center toe, sheathed in a single hoof, was larger, the side toes farther off the ground. That hoof had far more power than the dappleback's feet. Ratha had dodged it many times, and other herders had been sent sprawling.

The striper grunted and whinnied, its nostrils flaring with her smell. From her crouch, Ratha lifted her chin and stared up at the horse, trying to catch and hold its gaze. As if sensing her purpose, the striper reared, its forefeet cutting the air, its tail whisking its flanks. She froze again, waited.

When the striper dropped down, she pounced on its stare with her own. Again it evaded her, closing its eyes and ducking its head, showing her only its bristling mane.

She knew the stripers were smarter than the dapplebacks; by now her stare would have a dappleback helplessly imprisoned.

Thakur had warned her that the stripers were clever, that the larger head held a more alert and cunning mind. Suppressing her frustrated growl, Ratha made several rasping snarls that were almost barks.

The sounds had the effect she wanted. The striper's ears swiveled, the head came up, the eyes opened. Again her eyes sought the striper's gaze, and this time she captured it. The animal stiffened, as if about to fight, but snort and stamp as it would, the striper couldn't break Ratha's stare. It stilled to near immobility, only its hide shivering.

Ratha felt triumph strengthen her heartbeat and deepen her breathing. She was so close; she could reach out and tap one of the horse's forelegs with a front paw.

Again came the rush of desire that threatened to propel her up onto the horse's shoulders, driving her teeth into its neck. In her imagination, she was already atop the striper, feeling the stiff upright mane bristle into the corners of her mouth. Part of her already felt the velvet-furred skin resist, stretch, and then tear through beneath the points of her fangs, her neck muscles pulling and twisting in just the right way so that her fangs would slip between the neck bones and skillfully separate them while the prey's blood flowed in pulses over her tongue . . . .

Outwardly Ratha shuddered, yet kept her eyes fixed on those of the horse while inwardly she swiped the feelings aside. No, such a fevered attack was not the way of the Named.

She had fought this internal battle many times before, when she trained as a cub under Thakur, and later when she began her duties as a herder. Even when she culled herdbeasts, she would not let instinct run wild.

Ratha used her frustration and desire, pouring them out savagely through her eyes. The horse was now as still as if it were already in her killing embrace. The muscles and tendons atop her forelegs quivered with the need to drive her claws out and deep into flesh.

She lifted out of her crouch, rearing up on her hind paws to lay one foreleg almost gently over the horse's shoulders and up along the back of its neck. In spite of her care, the beast started, but before it could begin its escape flurry, Ratha slapped the other forepaw around the underside of its neck.

Now Ratha used her claws, but only enough to maintain her hold as she pushed backward with her hind feet to unbalance the striper and pull it over. She was so close to the horse now that she couldn't hold its gaze, but she no longer needed to. It was falling into the daze that doomed prey often assumed.

Instead of digging into the striper's nape with claws and teeth, Ratha used the pressure and friction of her pads combined with her weight and her experience in knowing exactly how and where to push in order to topple the beast.

As if in a trance, the striper sank to its knees. Ratha climbed farther onto it, using her weight to press the horse

down onto its belly. She draped herself across the animal, one forepaw keeping the horse's forelegs, with their dangerous hooves, at a distance. She wrapped the other forepaw around the top of the horse's head, twisting it up so that the throat lay exposed.

Feeling the striper's heartbeat thudding through its ribs and into her own body, Ratha bent her head, jaws starting to open. The heart's beat was strong in the creature's neck, visibly jolting the skin over the great vessels and releasing a deep temptation in Ratha to bite deeply and hard.

Instead she opened her mouth to its full gape and set her teeth in position for the instinctive throat bite. With the horse's sweat-smell hot in her nose, she squeezed her eyes shut with the effort not to bite, feeling the jaw-closing muscles beneath her eyes and on the sides of her forehead tremble with the strain.

The onlookers, Thakur and the young cubs learning herding from him, had grown quiet, as if they sensed the conflict within her.

Slowly, deliberately, she pulled her head up, feeling the skin of her muzzle slide back over her teeth as her mouth closed. She swallowed the saliva that had flooded her mouth, staying atop the striper while the youngsters shrilled their praise and Thakur added his deeper note. Their cries sounded strangely muted to her, as if they were distant or her ears muffled.

She wanted to speak to them, saying, this is how you take

down a striper, but a feeling stronger than just her heartbeat thudding in her chest held back her voice.

Something Ratha didn't understand made her give the horse's neck a gentle lick before she slipped her paws out from under its neck, lifted herself off its body, and quickly backed away. The striper lifted its head, then lurched to its feet. Before the horse took a step, Thakur and some older cubs surrounded it.

As Ratha watched them return the striper to its herd, she shook her pelt hard, as if she needed to shed it in preparation for resuming the mantle of Named clan leader. Today, she reminded herself, her role was more humble: guest herding instructor.

She struggled to rid herself of the confusion between ancient hunter and Named herder. Perhaps the feeling was stronger today because her leadership duties had taken her away from herding. Intense practice had brought back her skills, but not complete control of her instincts.

The cubs and their teacher were returning. Ratha lifted her head, now hearing individual voices instead of a general clamor.

"The males may be able to take down stripers, but I'll never be able to do that," said a discouraged little female voice.

"That is why I asked Ratha to show you the technique," Ratha heard Thakur say. He trotted toward her, his step springy, his whiskers fanning with pride. Scent and sight

told Ratha that he had groomed himself especially well this morning. The metallic copper highlights in his fur shimmered in the sun. He had lost the leg feathering of his winter coat, and his slender limbs were clean, his body taut and spare.

His scent had a musky undertone, reminding Ratha that the Named mating season was not far away. She wanted to rub herself luxuriously alongside him and flop her tail across his back. Instead, she contented herself with an affectionate head-rub and turned to the discouraged youngster, finding her voice at last.

“Little one,” she said to the cub, “it is true that the culling takedown is harder for female herders, especially with the stripers. We don’t have as much weight or muscle as the males.”

“Then how will I do it?”

Gently, Ratha explained how she depended on precision and balance instead of sheer force to bring a beast down.

“But you are special, clan leader,” said the cub. “You aren’t just a female, you’re—”

“As a herder, I am no different than any of you,” Ratha said, looking the cub in the eyes. “I had to struggle with takedowns when I was your age, even with the dapplebacks. And a three-horn stag chased me up a tree once.”

“No, really?” the cub asked, wide-eyed, and others joined with her, wrinkling their noses in disbelief that a mere herd-beast could terrorize the Tamer of the Red Tongue, the Giver of the New Law, their clan leader.

“Yes, really. Ask Thakur.”

The cubs clustered around their teacher, who answered, then shooed them all away, telling them to go practice stare-downs with three-horn fawns until he called them.

Ratha watched them bumble and scramble away, wondering if they knew she got dung between her pads and muck on her coat, just like everyone else.

“Let them worship you a bit,” Thakur said softly. “It helps them, especially the little females.”

“They are doing well this season,” Ratha mused. “It is hard to believe that it hasn’t been that long since Meoran forbade any female cubs to train as herders.”

“Except a certain one,” Thakur answered.

*Because you fought for me. You defied him to train me. You stood by me when I overthrew his tyranny.*

“I can answer the rest of the cubs’ questions. Go take a nap on the sunning rock, yearling,” he said, using his old name for her.

She had a new name for him, but one that she dared not use. Beloved.

Or, perhaps it wasn’t so new.

“May you eat of the haunch and sleep in the driest den, clan leader,” he said formally, and returned to the cubs.

She looked after him, letting her whiskers droop slightly in a silent sigh, then decided to take his advice.

