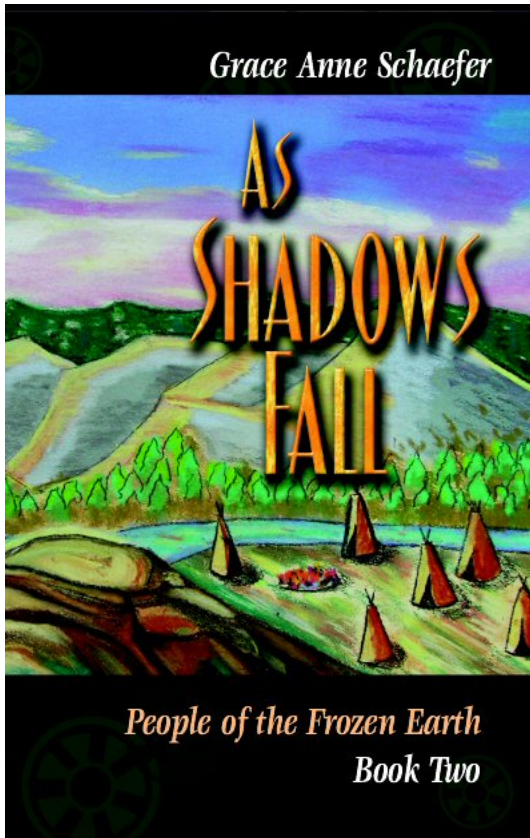


Preview



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Book One: The New Day Dawns and *Book Two: As
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CHAPTER 1



SHOCK FLASHED THROUGH HORDA, making her fingers tingle. *The Council doesn't do such things. My father wouldn't do such a thing to me. Would he?* Squeezing her eyes shut, she drew deep breaths until her anger trickled away. *Oh, please, Mother Life, wake me from this nightmare.*

She peeked through her eyelashes and found herself still in the midst of the Gathering assembly. The midday sun still beat down on the high mountains to the west casting small puddles of shadow on the brown grasses of the plains. The lazy breeze tweaked her nose and gently swirled the smoke from the assembly fire on its way to the other world. The crisp smells of pine, cedar, and sage mingled with the tart odor of grasses trampled beneath the feet of the People.

Opening her eyes, she looked up at her mate, Mach. The sun's golden rays cast red and blue highlights in his waist-length ebony hair and glistened on his shoulders. His scars from the Dance of the Sun had faded to pale circles on his pectoral muscles. Her fingers itched to trace the lines of his

chest — anything to make her father’s words go away. *I was dreaming*. She tried to pretend she hadn’t heard the words that would change her life forever.

She watched Mach whisper some comment to Thuro, his taller, but thinner, darker, and quieter best friend. Their eyes snapped and sparked like children who have just been given more camas molasses candy than they can hold in both hands. Her father Zaaco’s words hadn’t upset them.

“Did you know anything about this?” Thuro’s voice betrayed his awe.

Mach shook his head. “Just what I told you yesterday. That the People are forming a new band — mostly of younger warriors. I had no idea they were naming us the leaders. I can’t believe it.”

Thuro grinned. “I hinted to Elko that Wilda and I would like to be in the new band if we could. He said he didn’t have anything to do with the formation of bands.”

“I came out and told Zaaco that Horda and I would like to belong to the young band if it was possible.” Mach chuckled and shook his head. “He told me to be careful listening to gossip. Said I could get in a lot of trouble that way.”

Thuro slapped Mach on the back. “After all these years, we finally belong to the same band.”

Mach sobered. “Thuro, we’re in charge of the same band.”

Thuro shuddered while terror warred with the delight dancing in his dark eyes. “They must be crazy,” he said, shaking his head.

“I’m afraid they’ve made a mistake.” Mach’s bright smile wobbled just a little bit as a puffy cloud shadowed the sun.

“Do we know enough for this?”

“The Council thinks we do.”

“I’m afraid the new band’s in trouble if I’m one of the leaders,” said Thuro with a grimace.

Copper-skinned Wilda, tiny with a flat, almost bridgeless nose and round moon-shaped face, jingled the shells and beads adorning her smooth, black braids and glared at her mate before she stomped her bead-encrusted moccasin. “Don’t even say such things, Thuro. I don’t understand you. You will never amount to anything if you don’t quit telling everyone your own faults.”

Thuro hugged her. “And if I listen to you, I’ll be the most conceited warrior in the People of the Frozen Earth.” He laughed. “I have to keep a happy medium.”

She sniffed and continued to glare but didn’t say anything else.

Watching the exchange, Horda pushed at the golden brown wisps of hair curling around her lighter face. *Why do I have to deal with Wilda who looks exactly like everyone else when I am so different? Why can’t I at least deal with someone more like me?* Mentally she shrugged. There really wasn’t anyone else like her in the tribe.

Her father, the old chief Zaaco, once had thick brown hair with golden highlights, but it had always been coarse and straight like everybody else’s. Only Challa, the spoiled daughter of Khollo, had brown, curling hair with gold and copper highlights like Horda’s. Everyone else in the tribe had dark hair that never curled.

Only Horda and Challa of all the People of the Frozen Earth had amber eyes although Challa’s were several shades darker than Horda’s. Both the young woman and the child had light honey-colored skin — no one else shared the

golden tones they did. Only Horda had a delicate upturned nose; even Challa's nose looked more like the rest of the People's. All the others had dark, dark eyes ranging from brown to maroon to almost black, and everyone else's skin had dark bronzy-copper tones.

Mach often told Horda she was beautiful; and when she looked into his eyes, she felt beautiful. But his love and admiration couldn't quite drown the echoes of the taunts she had heard through her childhood. *No matter how hard I pretended otherwise, they had hurt — a lot.* Even as an adult, she still wished she looked more like everyone else.

She watched the tiny Wilda and fought the urge to slump, but slumping wouldn't make her shorter. She'd still be taller than everyone in the tribe except Mach, Thuro, and her father's second chief, Elko. *Some of the young People seem to be growing taller. Maybe they'll catch me someday.*

A small puffy cloud cast smudgy shadows, and a breeze wafted the mouth-watering smells of the Final Feast across the assembly. Horda's stomach growled, and Mach grinned at her. She ignored him and stared at the Council sitting on the raised platform around the Circle of Light. *If I don't admit it, my world won't be upside down, and my stomach won't have made that rude noise.*

Zaaco said, "We also want to recognize another of our able warriors who has chosen to join this new band. Zhrul, please stand."

The short, stocky warrior grinned and waved to the People who applauded. Zaaco smiled. "Will his mates Lucza and Urschia stand?" Horda's mind wandered as the women climbed to their feet.

"And another fine warrior who has shown his wisdom

and skills many times has asked to be a part of our newest band.” Zaaco’s voice rose cutting through his daughter’s inconsequential thoughts. “Zeek, will you and your mates Lena, Dita, and Reeme please stand?” Horda felt a smile curve her lips. She and Mach owed their lives to Zeek. If they had to be in this new band, it would be good to have him to help them.

Help us? Anger fluttered in her stomach. If Mach was to be one of the leaders of the new band, then she, as his number one mate, would also be one of the leaders. *Mother Life! My father can’t be serious about turning us loose to guide a band. We are too young, and we don’t begin to know enough.*

She stared at Zaaco standing in the Circle of Light. “You adults may be seated,” he said and waited for silence to fall once more. He smiled as he waited, but the undertone of sadness in his voice had touched a chord in her. Then he said, “Now, we recognize the most important members of any band — the children. I want all the little ones who belong to the new band to stand. If they’re too young to stand on their own, someone please hold them up so we can all see them and give them our applause.”

And Horda knew without a doubt he thought of Selah, his last and youngest mate. She had been breeding when Bear Claw stole Horda and the others. Zaaco, her father, had left his mates to search for her and the other women, and when he returned — Selah and their little one walked the Frozen Wilds. Neither Nuroo nor Norlon could explain what had happened.

One day Selah had seemed to be fine, but the next day she began to vomit uncontrollably, and then the waters had come. Nuroo knew it was too soon. Hardly a hand of moons

had passed, but nothing he tried stopped the wracking pains or even slowed them. The little one was born quickly — too quickly. The tiny warrior could hardly breathe and lay quietly like a little leather doll on his mother’s breast. With tears in her eyes Selah said, “I wish Zaaco was here.” Then like wisps of smoke on the gentle breezes both she and her little one were gone.

Zaaco seldom mentioned them, but at this Gathering Horda had noticed he often wore the tunics Selah had made for him. Sometimes he would touch the fringe or a sleeve almost as if he could feel her hand on his arm. He wore a faraway look in his eyes that had not been there before. Horda remembered how much he had loved the lively and spirited young woman. *Oh, Fa, I miss her too.*

Zaaco shifted the weight off his right leg. Anguish pierced her heart. *That’s the leg he injured saving us from Bear Claw. Two turnings of the seasons and still it pains him.* The old chief’s thin braids gleamed silver in the sun. *Mother Life! My father’s an old man. He will never take another mate. He will never have another little one. Soon ... too soon ... he will walk the Frozen Wilds himself. Oh, Mother Life, help me bear this pain!* Lowering her eyes she swallowed hard against the hot lump of tears growing in her throat.

She forced herself to count the children standing around the assembly. One finger less than a hand plus one hands. *My! I had no idea there were so many.*

Rain Drop and Storm Cloud stood solemnly beside the seated Unna until Zaaco called their names. Then bright smiles lighted their faces, and they waved both arms above their heads. The quiet little wraiths they had found when the kidnapped women arrived at Bear Claw’s camp had been

replaced by sturdy laughing children.

The little boy and girl each had a hand of winters according to Unna, the old medicine woman who had helped the Women of the Frozen Earth through their captivity. The oldest and youngest were the only surviving remnant of the People of the Tall Grass. Rain Drop and Storm Cloud had attached themselves to Horda and Suka when they had entered their camp.

Unconsciously, she cupped her hands around her flat stomach while Bear Claw's scarred face and angry words pushed their ways into her memory. Tears streamed once more as she remembered the pain shooting through her body.

"Because — I — was — not — your — first — man." Bear Claw had punctuated each word with another punch.

Remembered pain ripped through her stomach. *Mother Life, save me. I don't want to walk the Frozen Wilds. I want to go home. I want Mach. I rolled myself protectively around my stomach while Bear Claw continued to hit and kick me. The pain's fiery fingers wrapped around me and squeezed more tightly. My little one was departing ...*

A different kind of pain came roaring back. Horda swayed and leaned against Mach's solid warmth. "Are you all right?" He placed his arm around her shoulders.

She blinked and looked around, surprised to find herself at Gathering when she had been back in the nightmare of her kidnapping. "Yes."

Mach hugged her, but his attention had already returned to Thuro. She shook her head to dispel the memories, but they wouldn't go. That little one would be a toddler entering his second winter now. Grief clutched her heart and twisted.

She bit down on the inside of her mouth to keep from crying out.

Bear Claw's dead. He can't hurt me anymore. Nuroo and Unna say there's no reason I can't have more little ones — someday. It will be all right. Just like when we faced the council. It will be all right. Horda squared her shoulders and raised her head. *The hurt will go away. Mother Life gave me Rain Drop and Storm Cloud to love. I will be all right.*

“... the challenges of the new band?” Suka, a short, stocky woman with a hand's hands plus two hands of winters, waist-length raven-colored hair accented with a few strands of grey, and snapping brown eyes looked expectantly at her friend.

Horda blinked. *Oh, my. When did my father finish speaking?* “Suka, I'm sorry I didn't hear you.”

Suka, the second chief Elko's mate, laughed and shook her head. “I know it's a little daunting to suddenly find yourself the first mate of a leader, but I didn't expect *you* to be speechless.”

“It was quite ... unexpected,” Horda said softly.

Suddenly serious, Suka said, “But?”

“But what?”

“I sense you're not as excited as Mach and Thuro about their appointments. What's wrong?”

Horda looked toward Wilda who was still tapping the toe of her moccasin and jingling the decorations in her hair.

“I really didn't need to ask.” Suka grinned. “Come walk with me. I have things to tell you.”

Memories swirled in Horda's head as she silently followed Suka away from the assembly.

“Oh, Suka, I'm sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“I’ve put you in a bad position. I didn’t think anyone would ever know. But now they do.”

“I do not believe you deserve to taste the Wrath of Fire.”

“Oh, Suka, I don’t think so either, but I can’t just pretend this didn’t happen. I’m sorry. I just can’t. The fear of what will happen if anyone else speaks of it to the Council festers inside me like a wound.”

“I think you’re wrong. I hope you find it in your hearts to forgive yourselves and go forward from this time. You and Mach have a great deal to offer the People of the Frozen Earth. I pray you do not choose to throw all that you are away because you mated a few days before the Mating Ceremony, but I cannot make the choice for you.”

Suka will listen to my anger, but what if I lose her respect ... Horda swallowed an ironic smile. *If my unsanctified pregnancy didn’t cost me her respect, why do I worry about such a little thing?*

Because it is such a little thing, a voice deep inside her whispered. You and Wilda are adults. Your mates are going to share the leadership of a new band. Nobody says you have to like each other, but you have to get along. Horda muttered, “I’d have a better chance of getting along with a wounded grizzly.”

Suka smiled knowingly. “You must be speaking of wonderful Wilda.”

Horda felt her face flush. “I didn’t mean to speak aloud.”

“You should be ashamed for saying such an unseemly thing though it was an apt comparison.” Suka’s dark eyes twinkled in her stern face.

“Suka, I don’t know what to do,” wailed Horda. “She doesn’t like me. She has never liked me. Even when we were

children, she talked about my hair and eyes and made sure everyone noticed I was bigger and clumsier than she was.”

“That was a long time ago, Horda. You’re adults now,” said Suka.

“I know. I’ve told myself that. I try to get along with her, but she ignores me and acts like I smell bad. She blames me because Thuro joined the party to save us.”

“I sometimes wonder what she would have done if she’d been one of Bear Claw’s captives.” Tears glistened in Suka’s eyes.

Memories flooded Horda once more. Bear Claw’s icy silver eyes glittered in his scarred face while his big fists smashed into her body, and his mirthless laughter echoed in her ears. Remembered helplessness twisted through her.

Horda felt tears running down her face and reminded herself Bear Claw was dead. Mach had killed him. She reached out and clasped Suka’s hand. No one who had not experienced the horror of Bear Claw’s encampment could truly understand it. Nor could those who experienced it forget it.

Suka shook her head then glanced around to be sure no one else was near. Her lips curved into a smile. “Elko told me he wished Bear Claw had wanted Wilda. Then we wouldn’t have been in that camp.”

“Mach would have helped Thuro get Wilda back just like Thuro helped him.” Horda shivered thinking of what might have been. A fat tear hung on her lower lash before it dripped to her cheek. “Then I would have been alone ...”

“I’m sorry, Horda. That’s over,” Suka squeezed her cold hand and smiled. “I told Elko somebody would have been there if it wasn’t us. But he said Bear Claw could have had

Wilda, and he and Zaaco would have given prime furs to be sure he kept her.”

Horda’s mouth fell open. “Suka, that’s awful.”

“I know,” said Suka solemnly, “but doesn’t it make you feel better to know you aren’t the only one who doesn’t like Princess I’m Prettier than You?”

“You’re terrible.”

Suka hung her head and pursed her lips in a perfect expression of dismay, but her dancing eyes spoiled the effect. “The Council would have a fit if they could hear the number one mate of the second Chief now.”

“What would they do?” Horda asked.

Suka furrowed her brow, then smiled. “Scold, I imagine. Then grin behind their hands because they secretly agree with me though they’re much too polite to admit it.”

Horda nodded. Her father thought little of Wilda. She remembered his anger when Wilda suggested Thuro be appointed to the Inner Band as a reward for saving Mach and a small boy from drowning. *Wilda’s like my mother, Meiran.* Horda tried to dismiss that thought, but it kept nibbling at the corner of her mind.

Zaaco had tempered Meiran’s thirst for power with his quiet strength. He listened to her schemes and seldom raised his voice, though he teased, cajoled, or ignored her until she abandoned her more outrageous ideas and pleas for power.

Horda prayed silently. *Mother Life, help Thuro learn to control Wilda. If he doesn’t, he’s going to suffer just like Zaaco predicted.*

Suka frowned. “Did you ever stop to think she might be jealous of you?”

Horda squawked, “Jealous? Of me? What makes you say

such a thing?”

“Look at you.” Suka made a show of looking Horda up and down. “You’ve grown into a very special young woman.”

Horda rolled her eyes. “My hair won’t stay smooth for anything, and I’m too ta—”

“I know all the things you tell yourself to keep from admitting how beautiful you are,” snapped Suka, “but I have eyes.” She pointed to them. “I can see. Anyway, I’m not exactly talking about your looks. You have an air about—”

“Perhaps I need a bath,” joked Horda.

“You draw people to you,” Suka said as if Horda hadn’t interrupted. “They trust you and know you’ll help them if they need it even at great cost to yourself. Horrible though it was, our captivity taught you to relate to people. You really helped us.”

“I was hanging on by my fingernails just trying to get through it.”

Suka stared at her. “Maybe so, but the others didn’t realize it. All they knew was you protected them — and me — from Bear Claw by taking his wrath on yourself.”

“I didn’t do a very good job of it.” Horda smiled sadly. “Besides, Wilda doesn’t know anything about that.”

Suka seemed to ignore Horda’s words. “Mach loves you very much. You’re truly mates of the heart.”

“Thuro loves her.”

“Oh, yes, he loves her and carries her around on a fawn skin pillow,” Suka sniffed and leaned closer to Horda, “but he doesn’t trust her.”

“What do you mean?”

“I believe Thuro realizes she is a grasping, power-hungry woman. He knows he must watch her. Her thoughtless

actions could cost him everything he's gained on his own." Suka shook her head. "This wouldn't be a first offense. Zaaco won't be so tolerant a second time."

Horda felt her mouth drop open. Suka chuckled and pushed it shut with her right index finger. "Zaaco told Elko how she tried to get into the Inner Band. They're afraid she'll do something else stupid."

Horda frowned. "Since everyone seems to know how bad Wilda is, why was her mate chosen to be one of the leaders?"

"Because he deserves the honor. He's smart and a natural leader," Suka said.

Horda shook her head. "I don't see how he can be happy with her."

Suka shrugged. "Just because he realizes how bad she is doesn't mean he has accepted it."

"Why did he choose her?"

Suka grinned. "Men often think with other parts of their bodies besides their heads."

"Suka!" Horda felt her face flame.

"Well, they do," said Suka defensively. "Oh, I almost forgot. Zaaco asked me to explain why the Council named Mach and Thuro co-leaders of the new band."

Horda shook her head. "I was wondering. They're awfully young."

"That's one reason. Stop interrupting." Suka smiled to take the sting out of her rebuke. "Wilda has the same temperament as Meiran."

A cold fist clenched in the pit of Horda's stomach, and she felt the blood drain from her face.

"I don't mean to hurt your feelings, Horda. But when

Meiran was young, she didn't always act kindly.”

Horda bit her lip, but her honesty forced her to reply. “I know. It was a struggle even to the end of her life.”

“Anyway, you and Zaaco did a good job of,” Suka paused searching for a tactful word, “calming her.”

“Zaaco did it.”

Suka arched an eyebrow. “He did, but not alone. You helped him from the time you could talk.”

“He said that?” Tears threatened as memories of Meiran rushed back. Totally different from Meiran in both looks and temperament, Horda had loved her dearly, but she had not realized until the end of her mother's life that Meiran had loved her as well.

“No,” said Suka. “Not exactly. I watched you from the time you were a little girl try to help her be more kind and gentle.”

Horda wouldn't meet Suka's eyes. “So you want me to try to tame Wilda?”

Suka nodded.

“Why don't you give me something easy to do? Like stopping the wind from blowing? Or making it rain? It's awfully dry, you know.”

“I knew you'd understand.” Suka touched her shoulder gently.

Horda wailed. “You didn't even ask before you volunteered me for the worst job in the entire tribe.”

“I didn't volunteer you.” Suka waited for Horda to look her in the eyes. “Zaaco did.”

Horda glared at her friend. “He wouldn't do such a thing to me.”

Suka smiled. “Together we did.”

“Mother Life, deliver me from my friends and father.”

“I told you I’m only explaining one reason the council chose Mach and Thuro,” said Suka. “And that’s because you can help Thuro with Wilda.”

Horda rolled her eyes.

“Stop that,” said Suka. “The other reason they were chosen is they’re the best men for the job — and you’re the best woman to be the wife of a leader.”

Horda rolled her eyes again. “Stop flattering me. It won’t work.”

“Stop rolling your eyes,” Suka commanded more firmly. “It isn’t becoming to the number one mate of a leader.” She touched Horda’s shoulder. “You know I’m not flattering you. You have a talent with people. That’s important.”

Horda ignored the compliment. “Mach and Thuro are too young to be leaders. They only have four hands plus two winters. Many older men are more qualified.”

Suka shook her head. “Mach and Thuro are natural leaders. Zaaco and Elko both say the older men looked to them for guidance on the journey to save us. Anyway all the older members of the band volunteered knowing Mach and Thuro were the chiefs.”

“Humph. I didn’t volunteer,” grumbled Horda. “I don’t want to belong to this band.”

“Well, you’re not older. The Council didn’t consult you.” Suka patted her shoulder and grinned. “Sorry.”

“You’re not sorry,” Horda muttered. “You’re enjoying this.”

“No, I’m not. I really am sorry because I know this is going to be a terrible job.” Suka hugged Horda. “But you knew Mach had been chosen to lead before you mated with

him.”

Tears filled Horda’s eyes. “I knew, but I thought we’d have more time. I hoped we’d have little ones for him to enjoy before he became responsible for a band of People.” Once more she pressed her hands to her flat stomach.

“I understand. The band comes first even before the leader’s family.”

Horda’s voice broke and she sobbed. “Mach doesn’t have a family.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say.” Suka looked back at the two children swinging from Mach’s hands. “What are you? For that matter, what are Rain Drop and Storm Cloud?”

Horda dashed the tears from her face and glared at Suka.

“Well, you are a family. Aren’t you? I thought Storm Cloud would stay with me, but he took one look at Mach and forgot I existed.”

“The children didn’t want to be separated. They are very close to each other. They helped each other survive for three turnings of the seasons.”

“We would have taken both of them.”

Horda giggled. “You’d have had to take Mach too. Sometimes I think they’re permanently attached to him.”

Suka nodded. “You’ve both been good for them. They aren’t the ragged little waifs we found with Bear Claw’s people.”

“They’ve been good for us,” sighed Horda. “We love them, but they’re already growing up. They have a hand of winters. We long for our own little ones.” Horda bit her lip and looked around to be sure she wouldn’t be overheard before she whispered, “I tried to convince Mach to take

another mate at this Gathering.”

“I’m glad he didn’t listen to you,” Suka said. “That might have messed up the Council’s plans for him.”

“Do you mean his choosing a new mate would have kept him from being appointed chief?”

“It’s too late,” said Suka with a smile. “Anyway, the two of you will have little ones soon.”

“Do you really think so?” Horda’s eyes pleaded for reassurance. “Sometimes I just feel so guilty that Bear Claw killed our lit—”

“You’re not responsible for Bear Claw’s actions,” said Suka firmly.

Horda rubbed her eyes. “I know that.”

“Then be patient.”

“I’ve been patient long enough.”

Suka raised an eyebrow at the indignant expression on Horda’s face. “Mother Life will give you children when she’s ready and not before. Stop worrying.”

“You sound like Unna and Nuroo.”

“See, I know what I’m talking about.” Suka lowered her voice and whispered, “Wilda doesn’t appear to be pregnant either.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Of course, I doubt she will be until she allows Thuro close enough to muss her hair.”

“Suka, you’re terrible.” Horda clapped her hands over her mouth to muffle her giggles. “You shouldn’t say such things.”

“Why not? It’s the truth and you know it.” Suka shook her braids and preened in a perfect imitation of the flirtatious Wilda.

Abruptly sobering, Horda cried, “Suka, what am I going to do?”

“The best you can. That’s all we ask.” She hugged her again. “Our lives are changing. The council wants some of the younger men to have the authority to help the People meet those changes.”

Zaaco’s voice echoed in Horda’s memory — *I didn’t expect it to begin so soon, but I know changes are coming to our people. Our whole way of life must adjust, or we’ll disappear like the smoke from the morning fires. Someday when the People need him the most, Mach will walk in my moccasins.* She swallowed the lump in her throat. “My father believes changes are coming.”

“So do I.”

She blinked. “I know you’re right, but I just hate the thought of ...” Her voice trailed away.

“Hate the thought of what?” asked Mach joining them and hugging Horda.

“Congratulations, Mach,” said Suka formally holding out her hand to touch his. “You’ll be a fine leader.”

He grinned. “I hope so, but I’m more than a little afraid I don’t know enough for the job.”

“It’s a natural fear,” said Suka.

“I hope so.”

“Now, you sound like Elko.”

“Elko?” Mach’s mouth fell open. “You can’t compare me to him. He has as many winters as my fa.”

Suka smiled. “Not quite, though he does have many winters. But you must remember he was quite young when he was given his first band.”

“He had over a hand more winters than Thuro and me.”

“That’s why there are two of you,” said Suka primly. “He

was all alone. He nearly worried himself and me to death.”

“He’s a good leader,” said Mach.

“I know that and you know that, but he doesn’t always know it,” said Suka quietly. “He still worries he doesn’t know enough to be a chief.”

Mach shook his head. “Sometimes I’ve felt he moved too slowly, but I learned the hard way how much he had to consider before making a decision.”

“Sometimes he does move too slowly if you ask me,” said Suka, “though I cannot fault his decisions once he makes them.”

“Nor can I. What do you hate the thought of, Horda?” Mach returned his attention to his number one mate.

Horda stuttered, “We, ah, were, ah, just talking.”

Suka said, “Horda and I were discussing the reasons she will be particularly valuable to you and Thuro as co-leaders of the new band.”

Mach frowned at Horda. “You hate the thought of being the mate of a co-leader?”

“Not exactly,” she hedged.

Suka took a deep breath and seemed to make a decision. “One reason you were made co-leaders is because she had experience with Meiran.”

“Huh?” Mach blinked.

“Wilda is like the young Meiran,” explained Suka.

“Oh,” he said, “she is ... uhm ... unusual. Isn’t she?”

“Very.” Suka smiled at Horda. “Unless I’m mistaken, Mach was looking for you for his own reason.”

“Oh, yes.” He nodded. “I almost forgot. Zaaco wants to talk to you.”

“I suspect I’ve already talked to her, but you’d better go. He

might have something to add.” Suka smiled encouragingly.

Hand in hand Mach and Horda walked through the shadows to find Zaaco.