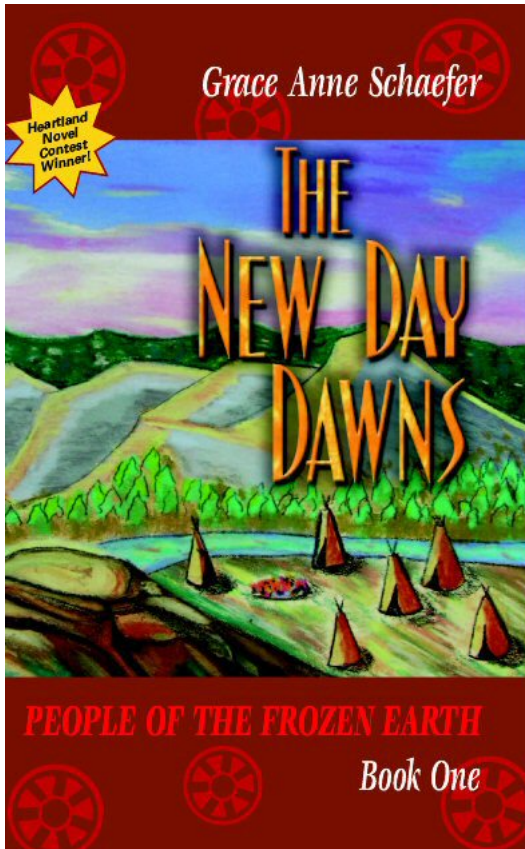


## *Preview*



Read more about the People of the Frozen Earth and the author:

[www.peopleofthefrozenearth.com](http://www.peopleofthefrozenearth.com)

*Book One: The New Day Dawns* and *Book Two: As Shadows Fall* are available from GASLight Publishing at

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## *Preface*



In the ancient days, before the Ancestors kept the stories, the People of the Frozen Earth lived in the vast frozen wasteland that is now called Siberia. Seeking a better life, they moved south across the land bridge into a New World, traveling through what are today Alaska and Canada. Just under two thousand years ago, the semi-nomadic People settled in the foothills at the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains and the flat tableland of the Western Great Plains in the area now known as Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas. Strong and proud, they lived, loved, hated, laughed, cried, and died in the fullness of Mother Life's time.

## *Prologue*



Adrenalin surged through Mach's veins, erasing a pleasant dream of Horda's amber eyes and urging him to complete wakefulness. What had woken him? His eyes flew open, and he tensed his muscles silently, preparing to face his unknown adversary.

He found himself staring across his feet into bright amber eyes. Ah, Horda, she was here after all. Surprised and delighted, he almost reached out to his love before he realized that here she was just a dream; she could not join him on his Great Travel. Then the diamond-shaped pupils registered in his consciousness. His fingers tightened automatically around the hilt of the fine flint knife on his belt as he stared back at the big-toothed cat sitting silently beside his feet. Not just a cat, no. It was nothing less than Father Death himself who waited there.

"Greetings," he said softly, though his insides shivered like aspen leaves in an autumn wind. "Have I taken your home as shelter from the snow storm?"

The big cat glared at the young warrior but did not move. Encouraged by the cat's lack of response, Mach inched to a sitting position. "I didn't think cats liked fire." He looked at the embers winking in his fire pit, without ever taking his eyes from the animal. "Of course, that isn't much of a fire anymore, is it?" He edged his free hand to the pile of twigs kept at the ready. Slowly, casually, he placed two handfuls of twigs and dried grass on the pit; when the flames renewed themselves, he added a medium-sized branch.

“Were you cold? I was. That’s why I came in here. This cave was empty when I chose it, but I’ll be happy to share it with you if you’d like. That’s a mean storm blowing out there.” He added another chunk of wood to the growing fire. “Don’t you think it seems a little fierce for this early in the season?”

*Mother Life, what am I doing carrying on a conversation with a big-toothed cat?*

Mach fought the bubble of hysterical laughter rising in his chest. He must keep calm. The cat growled deep in its throat, as if provoked by his words, and it swatted one enormous paw at the flames dancing in the fire pit. He tensed.

*I’m going to the Frozen Wilds ... just one more young warrior lost on his Great Travel ... never see Horda again ... never tell her I love her ... mate with her ... carry our little ones in my arms and teach them the ways of the People of the Frozen Earth.*

Mach’s fear of failure was greater than his fear of the cat. “No!” he roared, jumping to his feet and raising his knife as the great cat leaped. “You will not cheat me of my dreams!”

The cat’s fetid breath scorched his face while its claws tore his scalp and twisted in his ebony-colored hair, ripping a swatch out by its roots. Adrenalin, perhaps even more than his warrior’s training, powered Mach’s arm; he drove his knife into the animal’s chest again and again. “I will not walk the Frozen Wilds! I will go home to Horda. I will carry our little ones in my arms. You will not cheat me!”

The cat twitched and heaved, trying to get free, then it collapsed on top of Mach, almost pinning him to the rough cave floor. As he lay there panting with exertion, the blood from his wounds mingled with the cat’s, Mother Life and Father Death together as one. Then, with a strength born of his newfound conviction, Mach flung the carcass aside and scrambled to his feet. “I love Horda,” he repeated, more softly now. “You will not cheat me.

## Chapter 1



*Mine.*

Horda peered through half-closed eyelids at the rays of the setting sun. They glittered red and blue in Mach's ebony hair and kissed his powerful bronze shoulders — as she wished she could. She smiled to herself.

*Mine.*

The hustle and bustle of the gathered People of the Frozen Earth faded from her hearing. Her fingers traced the beads on the small leather pouch the handsome young warrior had fashioned for her from the bones and skin of the big cat that attacked him in the long lonely days of his Great Travel.

After living as many winters as the fingers of four hands and completing his Great Travel, Mach had reached the time to choose a mate and take his place as a Father of the Frozen Earth. The necklace, braided from his own hair, declared to the tribe his intention to court Horda. Her heart, as she stood silently by the cook fire, made its own declaration — to choose him.

Other men also courted her, the chief's eldest daughter. Horda accepted the attention of each of her suitors and even enjoyed it, but only Mach made her heart beat faster and filled her with feelings of love and desire.

*Ah, Mach, I can't remember when I didn't love you. Please love me, too.*

An increasingly familiar warmth washed through her body, and she quickly bent to tend the stew so he wouldn't see the

softening of her features as he walked past her father's campsite for the third time that afternoon.

Even before she understood about mating, she had loved Mach. He had been her gentle playmate and friend. Now, old enough to choose a mate, she dreamed only of mating with him. A smile played on her lips, and once more she stroked the fine cord braided from his ebony hair. He had presented gifts to no other eligible maidens.

*Please, don't let him change his mind, Mother Life. Let him bid for me.*

She raised her eyes and found him watching her, and a slight blush crept up her cheeks. He nodded to her as she met his gaze, but he didn't return her smile — not quite. At times like these he reminded her of an eagle — proud, almost regal, ever watchful. It made him even more desirable. She longed to call out and tell him she would soon be finished so they could walk, but she didn't quite dare, not with so many others around. Though Gathering provided the time for choosing mates, not all the taboos governing unmated behavior were relaxed. She contented herself with watching the handsome young warrior walk away. She knew he'd return, and they would walk together then.



Still lost in thoughts of Mach, Horda became aware of a sudden and unnatural silence that had fallen over the Gathering grounds. Looking around, she saw all the people looking in a single direction, toward a ragged band approaching the entrance to the camps. One man dominated the handfuls of others. Wrapped in a tattered, dirty bear fur and moving with long, measured strides, he looked more animal than human — not a bear, though. No, more like a mountain lion, poised and waiting to pounce.

Horda's eyes widened and her blood ran cold. *Mother Life, protect us.* As many warriors as she could count on the fingers

of five hands stood behind the ragged leader, and all were heavily armed with spears, shields, and war axes. Looking behind them, she felt angry sympathy rise to struggle with her fear. Bowed beneath huge packs and almost unrecognizable from their loads, one hand count of women stood at the edge of the group. What kind of men carried only their arms and overburdened their women so cruelly? A raiding party?

All thoughts of Mach flew from her head when the monstrous leader's cold eyes met hers, and fear clutched at her stomach. She looked quickly down at her work, peering only through her lashes as he led his strange entourage toward her. Horrid black scars like those sometimes caused by uncleaned wounds crossed his cheeks with fearful symmetry. His silver-black eyes roamed up and down her body before he grinned and licked his thick lips, as if anticipating a tasty meal. A predator, yes, and one to be feared.

Questions darted in and out of her mind with lightning quickness. Who were these people? What were they doing at the Gathering, a festive time for her people? Why was their leader staring at her so crudely? Even a child would never be so bold; had he never learned proper manners?

Barely suppressing a shudder, she felt her skin crawl beneath his continued scrutiny. She stirred antelope stew that needed no stirring and carefully kept her eyes averted while peeking through her lashes occasionally. Even so, she felt his approach as if she stared straight at him. When he neared the cook fire, her heart hammered in her ears, and her feet itched to run. She raised her head and watched him signal his people to stop beside her father's fire. Then he walked directly toward her. The smells of rancid bear grease, sweat, and dirt overpowered the good aromas of the stew and the sage brush fire and nearly overwhelmed her. She longed to be a child again so she could run and hide behind her mother's tunic.

*Mother Life, doesn't he ever bathe?*

Three fingers more than three hands old and finished with the rituals that preceded the choosing of a mate, Horda certainly understood the man's lewd interest. She also sensed he enjoyed her discomfort. She reminded herself, though, that she was the daughter of the chief. She would not allow him to intimidate her, nor would she show her fear. She raised her eyes to meet his stare. Though she stood as tall as most of the older men in her tribe, she was surprised to find her eyes almost level with the stranger's.

*Mother Life, he looked bigger and taller when he surveyed the camp. Was it all an illusion, or am I right to be afraid of this man?*

Framed by the grotesque scars, his hawk nose intersected the sharp plane of his high cheekbones before it beaked down toward his chin. His eyes, as they bored into her, shimmered like the deep ice at the center of the river in winter. How could they seem to radiate both heat and cold at once? It was more than a little unsettling, but she would not be rude. She would wait for him to speak first.

Once more the man's eyes roamed up and down her body like dirty fingers. She gritted her teeth and commanded herself not to fidget beneath his gaze. Her eyes flashed her distaste, but that was all she allowed to show.

"Greetings from Zaaco, Chief of the People of the Frozen Earth. I trust you had a pleasant journey."

Horda's knees almost buckled when her father's voice rumbled the traditional greeting from behind the stranger. Giving no indication he heard, the man's hard eyes continued to bore into Horda's.

Zaaco spoke again, more sharply this time. "Perhaps you did not hear me. Who are you? Why have you joined our Gathering?"

It was a rude question, but not entirely without merit, Horda thought, still staring at the repulsive man. In recent memory,

Gathering had included only the bands of the People of the Frozen Earth, but she knew it hadn't always been that way. She vaguely remembered stories about other Peoples attending Gathering before Zaaco became chief ... in the time before the last war. But that was long ago.

With an insolent half smile, the man flipped the ratty bearskin over his shoulder to reveal a short muscular body criss-crossed with scars, like those on his face, and clad only in a frayed woven grass breech cloth.

*Mother Life, his legs look like peeled tree stumps.*

Finally, almost as an afterthought, he turned to face the old chief. "I am Bear Claw, Chief of the People of the Tall Grass. These are some of my people." A negligent wave of his hand acknowledged the ragged men and women waiting huddled beyond Zaaco's camp. Bear Claw's accent was harsher, and his tones more guttural than those of the People of the Frozen Earth, but his words were familiar. Horda had little trouble understanding him. He gestured toward the packs the women carried. "We've come to trade. We understand this is your time of mating."

He turned again to gaze toward Horda before he continued. "You have many beautiful women. We have few. Many People of the Tall Grass departed in the last long, hungry cold. Most were women and children." He shrugged and smiled a cold smile at Horda, as if that explained enough.

Horda suppressed a shiver.

"I'm not sure I understand," commented Zaaco, still standing his ground.

"We'll trade for some of your women." He leered. "Then we'll make our own little ones. Our tribe will be strong again."

Out of the corner of her eye, Horda watched her father fight to keep his face blank. When he spoke, his voice sounded strained. "Our women are not available for trade."

Surprise or anger shimmered in Bear Claw's eyes, but his

voice did not reflect either. It was the same harsh, cold tone that sent shivers up Horda's spine. "Now I don't understand. Isn't this your time of mating?"

Zaaco nodded but did not speak.

"Then how can you say you won't trade? You haven't seen our goods. I assure you they're fine and different from the things your people make." Bear Claw's voice rose angrily.

"You're correct this is the time of mating among the People of the Frozen Earth, but we don't trade our women," Zaaco said with finality.

But Bear Claw ignored the chief's words. "I told you we brought fine trade goods. You have more women than you need, and we have far too few. We'll all benefit."

Zaaco, shook his head slowly. "Perhaps I did not make myself clear. Trading for women is not the way of the People of the Frozen Earth. Our women belong only to themselves. When the time comes for them to mate, the men court them and make bids to show they can care for them. The women choose the men with whom they will mate. There is no barter."

"Why?"

"Why?" Zaaco almost shouted.

Horda fought to keep from smiling at the stormy look on her father's face. He didn't like having his words questioned and certainly not by an ignorant stranger.

"Sit beside my fire, and I'll explain." Although Zaaco's words sounded cordial, his face reflected his anger. "My daughter will serve us wild rose tea."

Bear Claw's eyes gleamed as he stared at Horda once more, then he seated himself beside the fire. No, not seated, Horda thought, more like crouched. Again the image of the mountain lion sprang into her mind, and she frowned to herself.

Maybe if she ignored the man, at least as much as protocol allowed, he would take his band and go away. She gave the stew a quick stir before she prepared and offered Bear Claw a tea

brewed from the dried buds of the wild rose. When she served him, he caught her hand and squeezed her fingers against the horn until she almost spilled the scalding liquid on both of them.

Her amber eyes shot sparks, but she managed to keep her face blank and ignore the pain spiraling up her arm. Eyes gleaming, Bear Claw smiled coldly and released her hand almost dismissively. In spite of her resolve to give him no satisfaction, she glared back at him and flexed her numbed fingers. Bear Claw chuckled. It was not a pleasant sound.

Zaaco's brown eyes darkened, and his lips tightened until the wrinkles around his mouth thinned into a straight line, but he did not vent his fury. He had been a chief long enough to know when to fight and when to hold his ground. Horda smiled encouragingly at her father as she handed him his horn of tea. Though anger still flashed in the depths of the old chief's eyes, he spoke softly, "Thank you, Daughter. You may leave us."

Wanting to hear what came next, she protested, "But the stew needs—"

"Set it aside and leave us."

"It will not be good if it isn't tended properly," she argued.

Zaaco insisted, "I want you to leave us alone."

Horda knew when to give in herself. "Give me a moment. I'll take the stew to Elko's fire so it won't be ruined."

Zaaco shook his head but said no more. She pulled on protective deerskin hand covers before lifting the bison-stomach cooking bag and carrying it away.

Bear Claw watched her go. "She is beautiful, but she must learn obedience. I am a strong warrior and the Chief of my people. If she were mine, I could teach her to obey." Like Zaaco, he now spoke softly, but his tone carried an unmistakable threat.

"And I will be glad to trade for her," he continued. "Something about her calls to me. I like the spirit flashing in her unusual eyes, and I anticipate great pleasure in taming her. What do you want for her?"

Anger, pain, and a touch of fear flashed behind Zaaco's eyes, but he was strong, like a bison; he allowed none of his feelings to reach his face. "I have already told you she is not mine to trade."

Bear Claw frowned. "She is your daughter."

"Yes."

"She has a mate?"

"No."

"Then I want her."

Zaaco spoke softly but firmly. "That is her decision, not mine. But you should know — our men view women as earthly counterparts of the benevolent Mother Life. They are special." Bear Claw scowled disgustedly, but Zaaco ignored him and went on.

"Through them our tribe continues, so we must treat them with care and love. Women help us and lighten our burdens as we travel the earth filling our horns of time. We do not own them nor do they own us. We are all one People of the Frozen Earth."

Zaaco watched the anger swirl in Bear Claw's icy eyes for a moment, then he continued again. "We have rules governing mating. Men and women court at Gathering time. Men bid for the women they've chosen by bringing food, furs, hides, and tools to show their ability to care for them. Usually the men and women reach an agreement before the men make their bids, though this is not always the case. The men have the right not to bid for any of the women they court. As for the women, they have the right to accept or reject any and all bids."

"Bah." Bear Claw spat in the dirt at Zaaco's feet. "This is foolish prattle. Women belong to the men, first the father, then the mate. Men trade for the woman they want, and the women have no say. It is the way of the People of the Tall Grass."

"Then clearly your ways are different from our ways."

"Our ways are better. It is too much trouble to have to court

some lowly woman.”

Zaaco forced himself to smile and speak respectfully. “Some day, if we are looking for mates, we may trek to your Gathering. If that is so, we will trade with you, as *your* custom.”

Bear Claw tensed at the sarcasm concealed behind the old man’s soft words. “We need women now, and we will trade for them.” His tone left no room for argument, but Zaaco lived by his convictions supporting his people and their beliefs.

Speaking calmly, the old man hoped his reasonableness would forestall any further discord. “I have told you repeatedly, we do not trade our women, and we will not consider doing so. You have joined our Gathering. If you wish to participate, you are welcome, but only if you agree to our rules. You said you brought fine trade goods. I urge you to use them to bid for the women of your choice.”

Bear Claw started to spit again, but the black look in Zaaco’s eyes stopped him. Instead he snarled, “Foolishness!”

“This is our Gathering,” repeated Zaaco.

Bear Claw surveyed the camp then stared at Horda, now working beside Elko’s fire. A frown twisted his gruesome scars. His voice, when he spoke, was almost thoughtful. “I don’t understand why — perhaps it is the fire in her eyes, or ...” he paused to lick his blubbery lips again “... her ripe body, but I must have your daughter. It is a waste of time, but I will try your way.”

Rising, Zaaco replied, “Then you are welcome to join our Gathering. We wish you a pleasant and prosperous time. One of my warriors will show you where your people may camp.”

Bear Claw rose without acknowledging the old man’s words. Turning away he muttered, just loudly enough for the chief to hear, “I *will* have your daughter, old man.”

Zaaco chose not to respond to the younger man’s softly spoken threats. He would alert his own warriors in case of trouble, but he would not force a confrontation, at least not now.

The People of the Frozen Earth held life sacred — never

to be taken lightly; Zaaco embraced that idea. He also believed they were the strongest tribe of the Great Plains and would readily defend what they cherished. They had avoided war for almost three hands' turnings of the seasons, but the last time they fought, they had annihilated two groups who united to conquer them.

That time and many times before, they had proven their strength by winning victories in the bloody battles others forced them to fight. Zaaco knew they were still strong and well-equipped, and to him the avoidance of war proved their position of strength rather than weakness. It was important to know when not to fight, as well as when to engage the enemy. His warriors held themselves trained and ready for whenever a time to fight might arise.

Such thoughts made Zaaco look back across his long life. He had been a warrior barely in his prime the last time any others truly challenged the People. When that war finally ended, he became the Chief — the youngest chief to lead the People of the Frozen Earth. The seasons had turned one finger less than three hands since then. He looked at his hands now scarred and roped with veins, and he rubbed the vague pain that never completely left the knuckles of his left hand. He had grown old. Old, but still strong.

Zaaco smiled sadly. In those younger days, Horda had been a little girl with big amber eyes and long brown braids that always refused to remain smooth. Now she was a woman grown, and Bear Claw wanted her. But the chief sensed violence seething in Bear Claw, and he feared the peace of the People of the Frozen Earth would soon be shattered unless he sacrificed his daughter to the cruel man's lust. But the decision is hers, he reminded himself. It is our way.