



Extract from Blood Brothers
Book Two of the Circular Scrolls

The Bear

The sun caught the white tips to the hairs as his movement rippled the muscles across his back and over the hump of muscle at the base of his head. He was unaware of her. She watched as he poked his long snout into the bark crevices of the trees, looking for grubs and insects.

There was a crack like a pistol shot. Sam, absorbed in the bear, was confused as to its direction and source. Instinctively she moved and her hand went to her bow - the bow that wasn't there. The bear reacted instinctively too. He reared up on his hind legs. Sam gasped. He was twice her height and more. The switch from a benign forager to aggressive predator took her completely off balance. And now she was afraid. The beast smelt the fear and in that instant his whole attention was upon her though she had not been the source of the noise. All the wisdom and intuition of her accumulated years deserted her then, ran out of her, like water from a vessel which has sprung a leak. She felt her body go limp. Instinct told her she must not run; to turn her back on him and run would be her end; he would be upon her in the wink of an eye and fell her with one pat from that huge paw. Instinct told her she should shout, wave her arms about, command him to stop but instinct had lost all power of speech and deserted her. A sort of resignation swept across her; with one tiny part of her mind she formed the thought: *Great Spirit I have much to achieve; is it your will I should die here? Is it a good day to die?*

There was a crack;

It rent the air like a tree felled in a winter gale.

And out of the past he came, as if in a vision, though the blue had faded to grey and the coat was barely a covering.

He stood, feet braced, slightly apart; in his hands he held a long, thin gun; it was raised and pointing directly at the animal's chest. The first shot had been fired over its head, ricocheting into the trees beyond. It was not then, Sam thought, his intent to kill or even injure for he could easily have done so with such a weapon. Her tribe had had but few of these weapons, acquired from bloody skirmishes with the wasicu, white man. Sam had not used one nor experienced the use of one at such close quarters.

They stood, face to face, the man and the bear, matched in power and resolution. Each radiated a force which drew an arc of light about them, equally matched, and bound to each other. Then, simultaneously, the man lowered his weapon and the bear dropped on to all fours. For long moments they regarded each other, seeing their differences, acknowledging their unity;

the bear, thin from his winter fast, the man, emaciated by hardship and care, both in his way, victim and victor.

Then they turned, the man towards me and the bear away, back from whence he came, both quietly, without haste. I watched. I did not move. It was a painting from long ago and I was part of it. I was honoured.

He looked younger than I remembered. Then he had looked as an old chief looks who carries the burden of decision for many. Now he looked like a seasoned warrior, battle-scarred but proud, as if life since I had last seen him had given him new reason to count her blessings.

He was thin to the point of emaciation, but thin as the wolf is thin, with vigour, and the knowledge that the new year is about to begin and he and his family will once again eat their fill, with the birth of the caribou young. He still wore the blue uniform, faded, stained and tattered, like the remnants of an old flag. He must have killed to eat. Why had he not fashioned some covering out of the animal's skin? Perhaps he had not the skill. Yet I felt there was more to it than this. This uniform, this battle dress of his old life, still held some significance for him and its forsaking would perform some part in an initiation into a new life. I knew this. So time had not spoiled the channel of our communication.

We walked back to our camp together, the boy and the man; the red and the white; we walked side-by-side; we did not speak; we looked straight at the path before us; but my heart rejoiced and I knew that his did also. One time we stopped by a stream to slake our thirst. We looked at each other. I saw then, in his eyes, through his eyes, what he had suffered in the moons between our meetings; saw again what I had seen on that high windy ridge; saw the slaughter, felt the fire, smelt death, felt his shame; I saw in his eyes that he sought forgiveness for what his people had done to my people; what he had done, by his part, by his hand; I knew he had felt their hatred and I knew he was afraid that I would hate him too. I reached out my hand and touched his hand. I saw that the sun and the wind had made us of one colour. I took the knife from my belt and made a small cut in the palm of my left hand. He held out his left hand to me and I made a small cut in his palm also. I looked down at the thin trickle of red blood on my palm; I looked at the thin trickle of red blood on his palm; where was the difference? I saw the tears then stand in his eyes, felt his pain like an open wound. But it would heal. He had found us now and it would heal. His time for the taking of life was done. I reached out my hand and grasped his and our blood mingled. Our eyes met. He nodded. We understood each other.

Later I was to discover that this man was born in the harvest time and his totem was the bear. It was fitting then that he and my bear should recognise each other. So it was that my vision began to take shape; that here, on this day, the wolf joined with the bear, in the first of many joinings...

As they walked through the trees side-by-side, there were questions burning in Sam's mind that she longed to ask but the silence between them spoke of a bridge yet to be crossed, a rite of passage in which she had no part to play, and she remained mute.

The journey back to the camp was a long one but the time was eaten in thought. To Sam's surprise they were greeted as they approached by the smell of a camp fire, the first to be lighted outside after the long winter, as if in readiness. Ne'Sa tin and Kimimela were standing side by side and a little to the left of the blaze, which was newly lit but well caught. Ne'Sa tin watched the stranger approach, her face giving no hint to her thought. Kimimela also reflected her mother's calm; only a move taking her closer to her mother's side betrayed any underlying insecurity. Then Ne Sa tin looked across at her son and nodded once. Sam breathed out. It was accepted. Had there ever been any doubt? This stranger was part of their life. He had taken life, but he had given it also. It was the way of things. Then the soldier, for thus his faded blue coat still proclaimed him, stepped up to the fire. With great care he laid down his weapon at his feet. Then he stripped himself; first of the barely blue jacket with its insignia of past rank and authority; then the torn breeches and belt; and finally the long boots. He stood naked before the blaze, before them, the kin, the survivors, of the slain. Then the ferocity of the battle was plain to see. Crooked, badly healed scars were drawn upon his pale nakedness, a testament to what had been both handed out and received in the course of the struggle. With great care he picked up each item of clothing and dropped it on to the flames. As each caught fire and burnt, he added another until only the soles of the boots remained, smouldering among the embers. Only then did he look up and Sam saw a new freedom in his eyes; the bridge had been crossed and burnt behind him, and the old life and what he had been along with it. This was the start of a new life and one which his heart embraced with joy and his spirit had recognised long ago.

Extract from Blood Brothers, Book Two of the Circular Scrolls, by Bridget Trafford.

ISBN 142514306-7