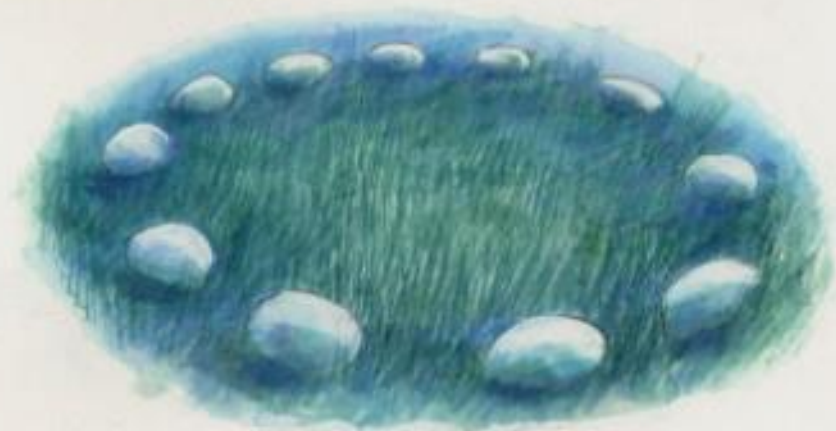


### CHAPTER THREE

## *The Journey Begins*

After the ceremony in which I bravely endured all four rounds of increasing heat, I spent the rest of the day preparing for what lay ahead. On my Vision Quest, I could take no food, only a skin bag of water. And I would not sleep for three days and nights.

During the nights, I must sit within the sacred circle made from my hand-chosen, dazzling white rocks, which I would carry up the mountainside. If I left the circle, I would fail the test.

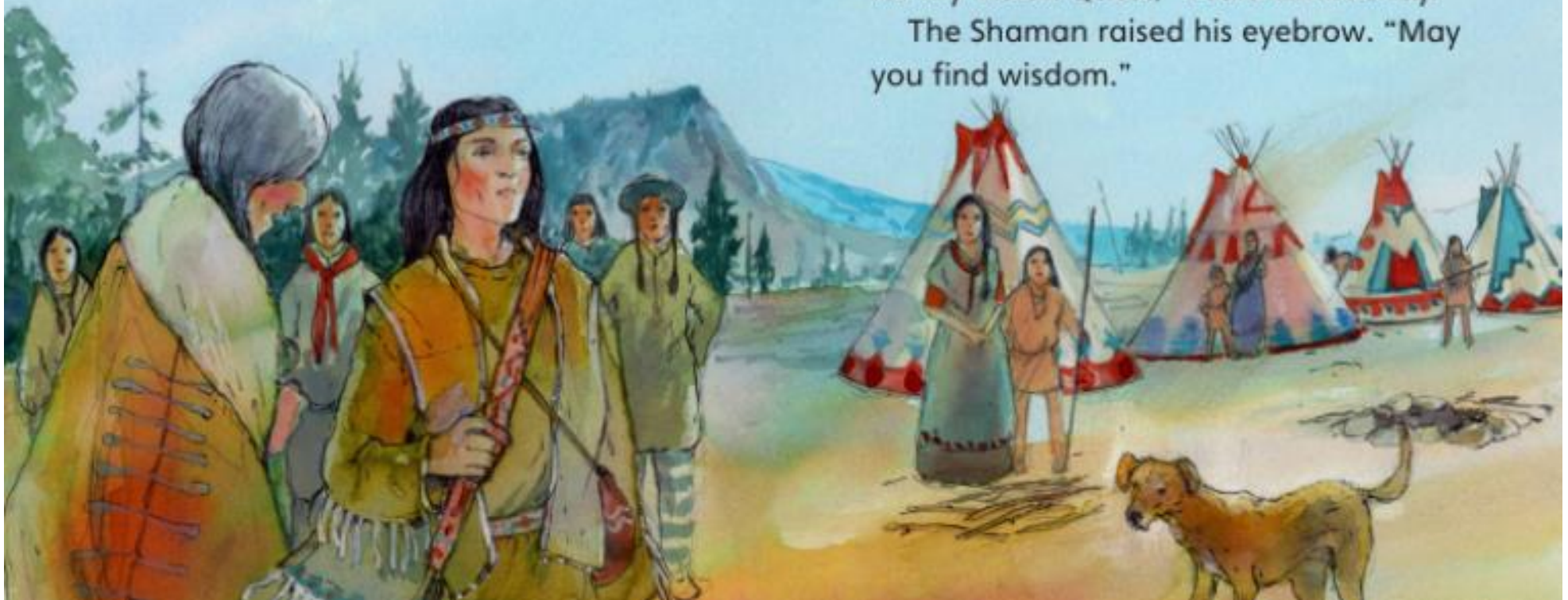


The next morning, I stood as the Shaman bestowed the final blessing for my journey. It was a perfect day. The brilliant sunshine shimmered as I admired the beautifully painted teepees, each with its own family design. The entire village had come to wish me luck, including the old dog that had tripped me up. I glared at it, but the animal must have been too foolish to recognise my warning.

The Shaman finished his blessing, which included asking for help from the rocks I was taking with me – rocks we call Grandfather and Grandmother. Then he leaned in and spoke quietly. “You do not have to go far up the mountain, Wind Runner. For many years, warriors have used a clearing along the trail for this ritual. You will know it when you see it.”

“Thank you, but *I* will choose the place for my Vision Quest,” I said confidently.

The Shaman raised his eyebrow. “May you find wisdom.”

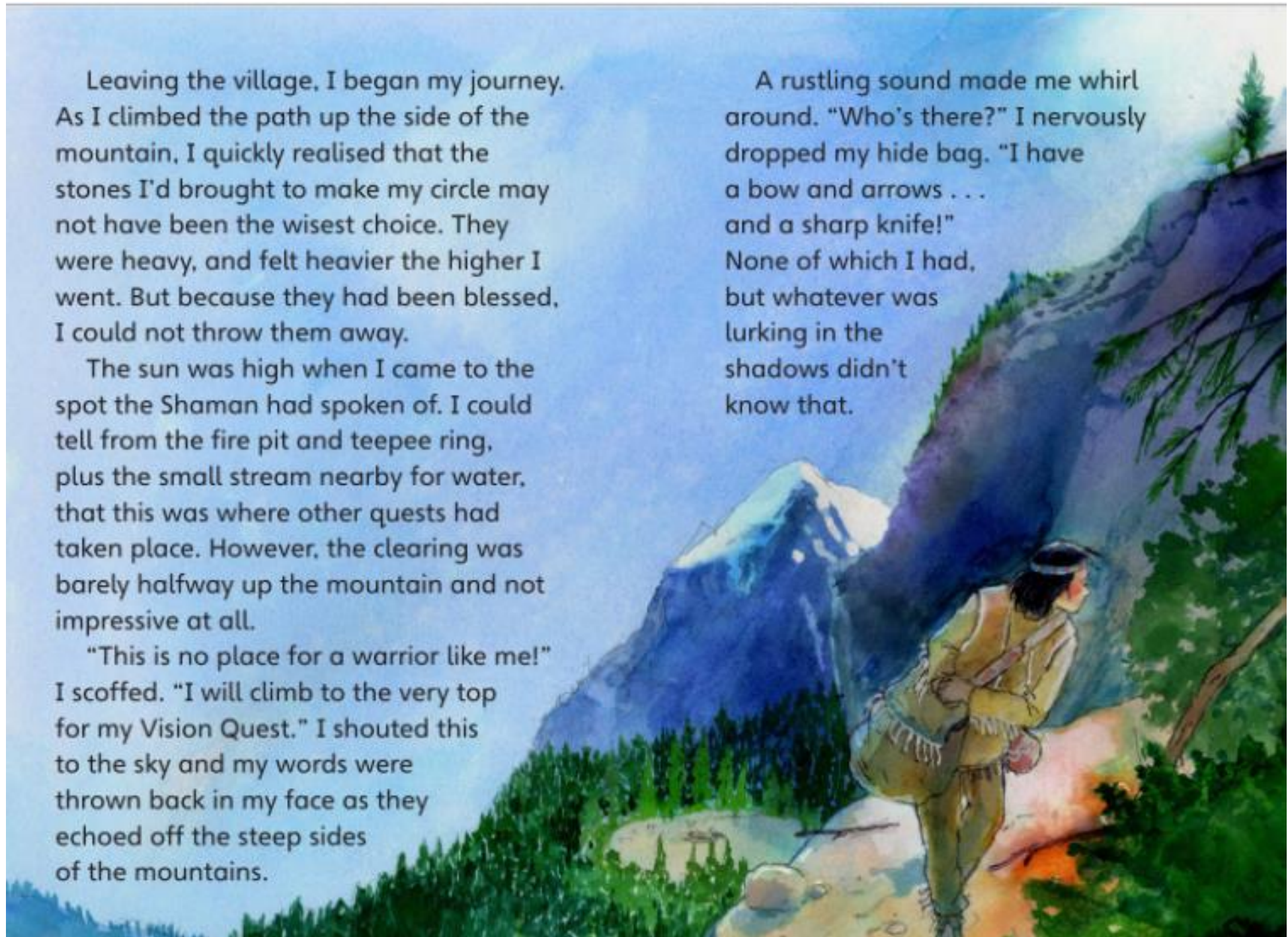


Leaving the village, I began my journey. As I climbed the path up the side of the mountain, I quickly realised that the stones I'd brought to make my circle may not have been the wisest choice. They were heavy, and felt heavier the higher I went. But because they had been blessed, I could not throw them away.

The sun was high when I came to the spot the Shaman had spoken of. I could tell from the fire pit and teepee ring, plus the small stream nearby for water, that this was where other quests had taken place. However, the clearing was barely halfway up the mountain and not impressive at all.

"This is no place for a warrior like me!" I scoffed. "I will climb to the very top for my Vision Quest." I shouted this to the sky and my words were thrown back in my face as they echoed off the steep sides of the mountains.

A rustling sound made me whirl around. "Who's there?" I nervously dropped my hide bag. "I have a bow and arrows . . . and a sharp knife!" None of which I had, but whatever was lurking in the shadows didn't know that.



I tensed, waiting.

Suddenly, a matted brown head poked out from between the bushes, and then the rest of the mangy dog appeared.

"You! You nasty flea-bitten bag of bones! Did you come to embarrass me again?" I picked up a stick and ran at the dog, trying to frighten it.

The foolish dog thought I was playing. It leapt and bounded around me, barking delightedly.

"Stop that! I don't want you here. Now, go!" I threw the stick.

The dog retrieved the branch, laying it at my feet.



"I don't have time to bother with you, Worthless One." Picking up the heavy bag of stones, I strode past the panting mutt.



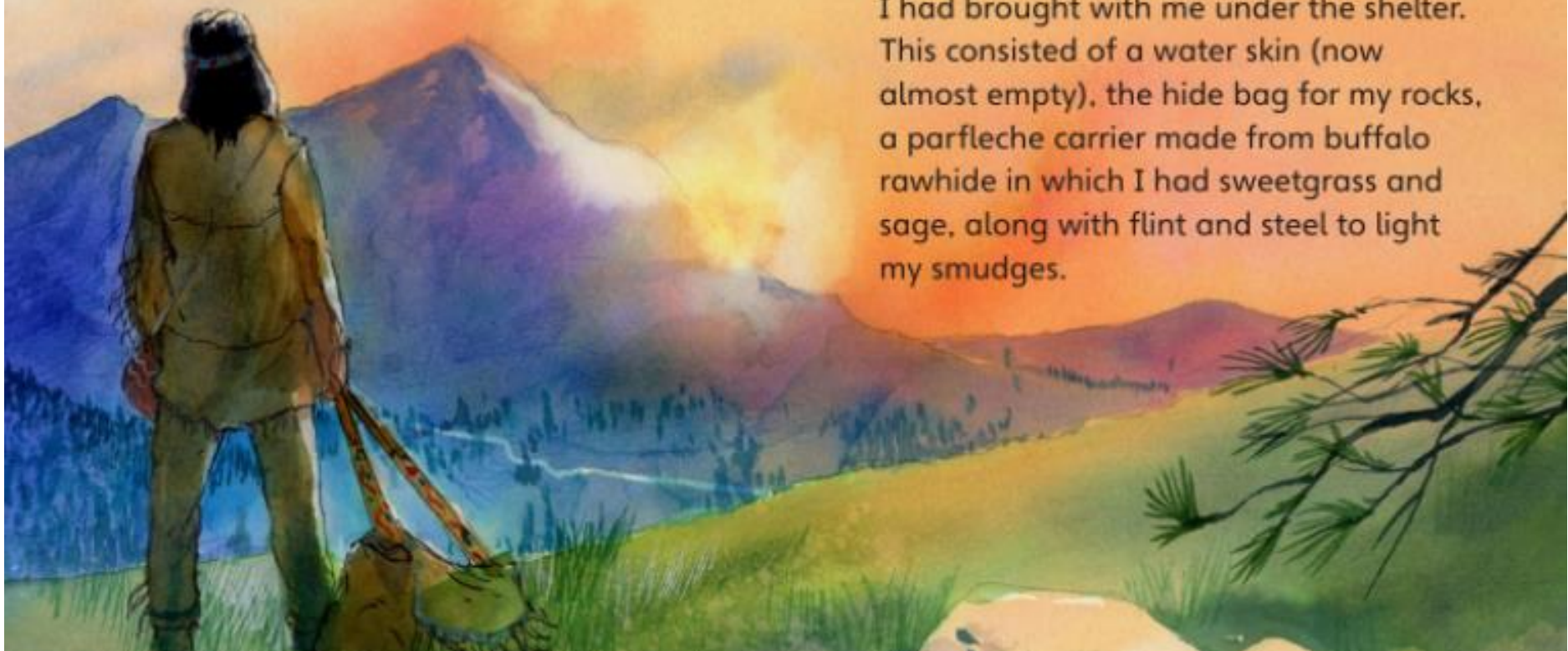
As I walked, the path became steeper. My back ached from the weight of the rocks and I became very thirsty. I knew I should keep my water for later, but decided a small sip wouldn't hurt. Trudging up the mountain, I continued to drink the water until there was little left.

The sun was hiding behind the peaks when I came to a clearing that overlooked the valley far below. The view was amazing.

"Here is a fitting place to make my Vision Quest." I dropped the bag and sat to rest before setting up camp. I was exhausted already and my trial had only just begun.

After stealing another mouthful of water, I set up my sacred space. I pulled the white stones out of the bag and placed them in a circle in which I could comfortably sit. I made sure I left an opening facing east to welcome the first rays of the sun.

When this was done, I made a lean-to of pine branches and stowed everything I had brought with me under the shelter. This consisted of a water skin (now almost empty), the hide bag for my rocks, a parfleche carrier made from buffalo rawhide in which I had sweetgrass and sage, along with flint and steel to light my smudges.



As evening threw long shadows across the clearing, I prepared for my first vigil. I raised my arms to the sky to sing the power song I'd made up. I would ask Creator for his blessing to make it through the coming night. I hadn't earned the song yet, which was a tribute to a warrior's courage and bravery, but decided that it wouldn't be long before I had.

No sooner had I expelled my first breath when a gravelly howl made me stop. There, sitting with its head raised and baying like a fool, was the old dog. "Worthless One, be quiet! You will offend Creator with that racket."

The dog was either deaf or stubborn, and for the rest of my song its unwanted wailing drowned out my words.





