


CHAPTER ONE

Dancing and Dogs

Every eye was on me, Wind Runner of the mighty Raven People, as I danced to the beat of the sacred drum. This was my night. Tomorrow, I would start the most important journey of my life, my Vision Quest, and when I returned from three nights in the wilderness alone, I would be a warrior. At fourteen summers, I would be a man.

The light from the ceremonial fire flashed off the bright red glass beads on my regalia. I'd convinced my mother to trade five rich beaver pelts with the chief trader at the Hudson's Bay post for those beads. The pelts were worth thirty-five knives, but I didn't care. I wanted those beads. My breastplate, which fitted snugly over my buckskin shirt, had a complicated design woven of bone and dyed porcupine quills, and the red beads

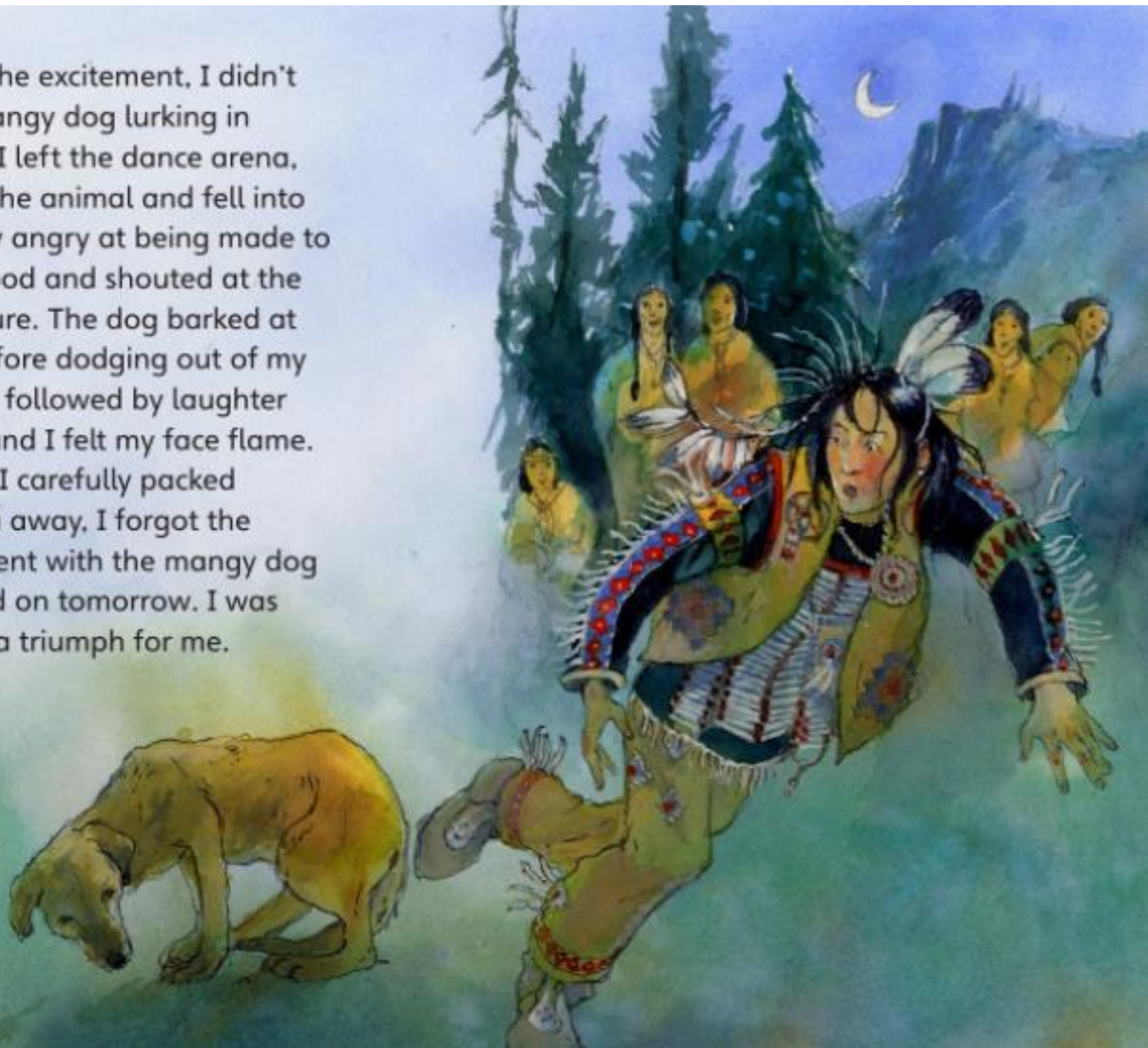


made it more beautiful than any other in the tribe.

Whirling and spinning, I leapt high into the air and finished on the last beat of the drum. Everyone cheered and I waved proudly.

Caught up in the excitement, I didn't notice the old mangy dog lurking in the shadows. As I left the dance arena, I stumbled over the animal and fell into the dirt. Instantly angry at being made to look foolish, I stood and shouted at the flea-bitten creature. The dog barked at me, unafraid, before dodging out of my way. My exit was followed by laughter from the crowd and I felt my face flame.

That night, as I carefully packed my dance regalia away, I forgot the humiliating incident with the mangy dog and concentrated on tomorrow. I was sure it would be a triumph for me.



CHAPTER TWO

The Ceremony

I awoke at dawn, excited about the sweat lodge ceremony that would prepare me for my successful Vision Quest. I dressed in only a loincloth and walked to the lodge.

The hides covering the sweat lodge were buffalo – the most important of all the animals Creator had given his people. From this beast, we received the gifts of food, clothing, tools and shelter.

I waited outside as the Shaman chanted a prayer, then lit sweetgrass and sage in a bowl. He used his sacred eagle feather to waft the sweet smoke over me. Once this cleansing smudge was finished, I entered the lodge.

Kneeling, I crawled inside and moved to the left of the opening. The dim light showed me the waiting Elder sitting across from the door. There was a shallow pit in the middle of the floor into which red-hot

stones would be placed. Water would be poured over the stones to create steam. The light loincloth I wore would help keep me cool, as it would soon be sweltering inside the lodge.



"Are you prepared for this journey?" Many Horses, the Elder leading the ceremony, asked.

"I am, Grandfather." Although he was not my true relative, I used the term out of respect for this ancient man and his wisdom. "I welcome the trial of the steam and the blessing of the smoke from the sacred herbs."

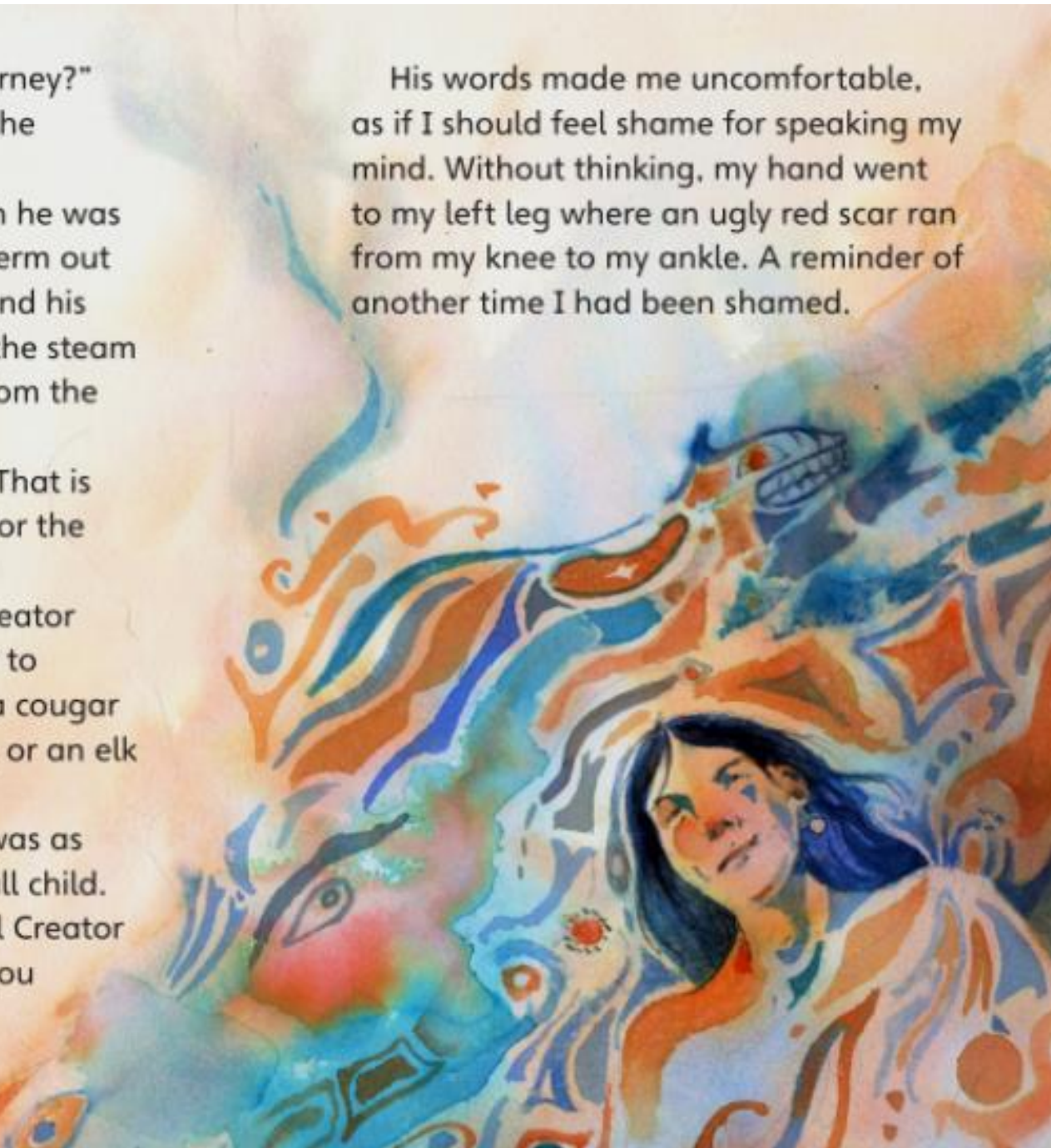
The Elder nodded approval. "That is good. We need strong warriors for the Raven People."

I boldly went on. "I will tell Creator to send me a fitting Spirit Helper to guide me on my Vision Quest – a cougar perhaps, to show my leadership, or an elk to represent my strength."

When Many Horses spoke, it was as though he were talking to a small child.

"You, Wind Runner, do not tell Creator what Spirit Helper you want. If you deserve one at all, he will send what he thinks you need most for your life journey."

His words made me uncomfortable, as if I should feel shame for speaking my mind. Without thinking, my hand went to my left leg where an ugly red scar ran from my knee to my ankle. A reminder of another time I had been shamed.



When I was twelve, I'd been chased up a tree by a huge grizzly bear. The bear had reached up and scraped my leg with its claws before disappearing into the woods. I'd been so frightened that I had clung to the tree and cried like a small child. It was there, high in the branches, where my father and the other warriors had found me weeping. Even now, as I prepared to join their ranks, the memory haunted me.

