

An illustration of a person with long dark hair, wearing a brown tunic and a headband, sitting in a meditative pose within a circle of stones. The scene is set at night in a forest with bare trees and a full moon in a dark blue sky. The person is looking towards the right. The ground is covered in snow or light-colored earth.

CHAPTER SIX

The Longest Night

The next night, I was sure I would see a vision. I was also sure my Spirit Helper would come at last. My stomach rumbled as I took up my position in the stone circle, but now the hunger didn't bother me. I knew I could make it.

With a sigh, the old dog settled next to me in the circle and this time I didn't chase

it away. The night was filled with smells and sounds that I'd never noticed before. There was life all around me. The air was sweet and my heart full as I watched the moon rise over the treetops. "Thank you, Creator, for the gift of this night."

Suddenly, I heard a noise that made all the terror in the world rise up and swallow me whole. A woofing sound I knew well.

It was a bear, and it was close!

Fear numbed me. I prayed the animal would pass by, but with a low growl, it lumbered into the clearing. I couldn't breathe and my hand went to the scar on my leg, as though to protect it from further harm.

The huge black bear smelled like rotting meat and I saw the long razor claws tear the earth as it hunted for grubs under a nearby log. Then, as though only now noticing, it stopped ripping at the stump and turned towards me.

I had to run! I had to hide! Could I climb a tree fast enough this time? All these thoughts flew through my mind as I tried to think about what I should do.

I'd been so close to finishing my Vision Quest, but I couldn't stay here any longer. Trying not to startle the huge monster, I prepared to leap up and run.

As I moved my hand, I brushed the fur of the old dog. I glanced down at the animal and it gazed up at me with calm eyes. It neither barked, nor moved. Instead, it held completely still and closed its eyes as though going to sleep. Was this dog crazy? The bear would have us both!



I thought of the snake and how the dog had shown me to use my belt to stop the rattler from getting too close. Then I remembered how we'd made ourselves appear larger and howled at the wolf to drive it away.

I nodded at the dog, understanding at last, and sat perfectly still. Then I closed my eyes.

My heart beat loudly in my chest as I willed myself not to move. The bear came closer and I heard it nudge a couple of my special rocks as it foraged for food.

I felt the animal's hot breath on my skin. It sniffed me, then licked the salt off my sweating face. Still I dared not move.

A huge paw nudged my leg and a razor-sharp claw pulled my moccasin off my foot! The bear chewed on the worn leather, tasting it, then spat it out and moved to the old dog.

The dog remained as still as stone.



Finding no threat nor easy food, the powerful bear continued past us, melting into the black shadows of the trees.

Something kept me there. I felt my fear, so deep inside me, float up and out into the cool night.

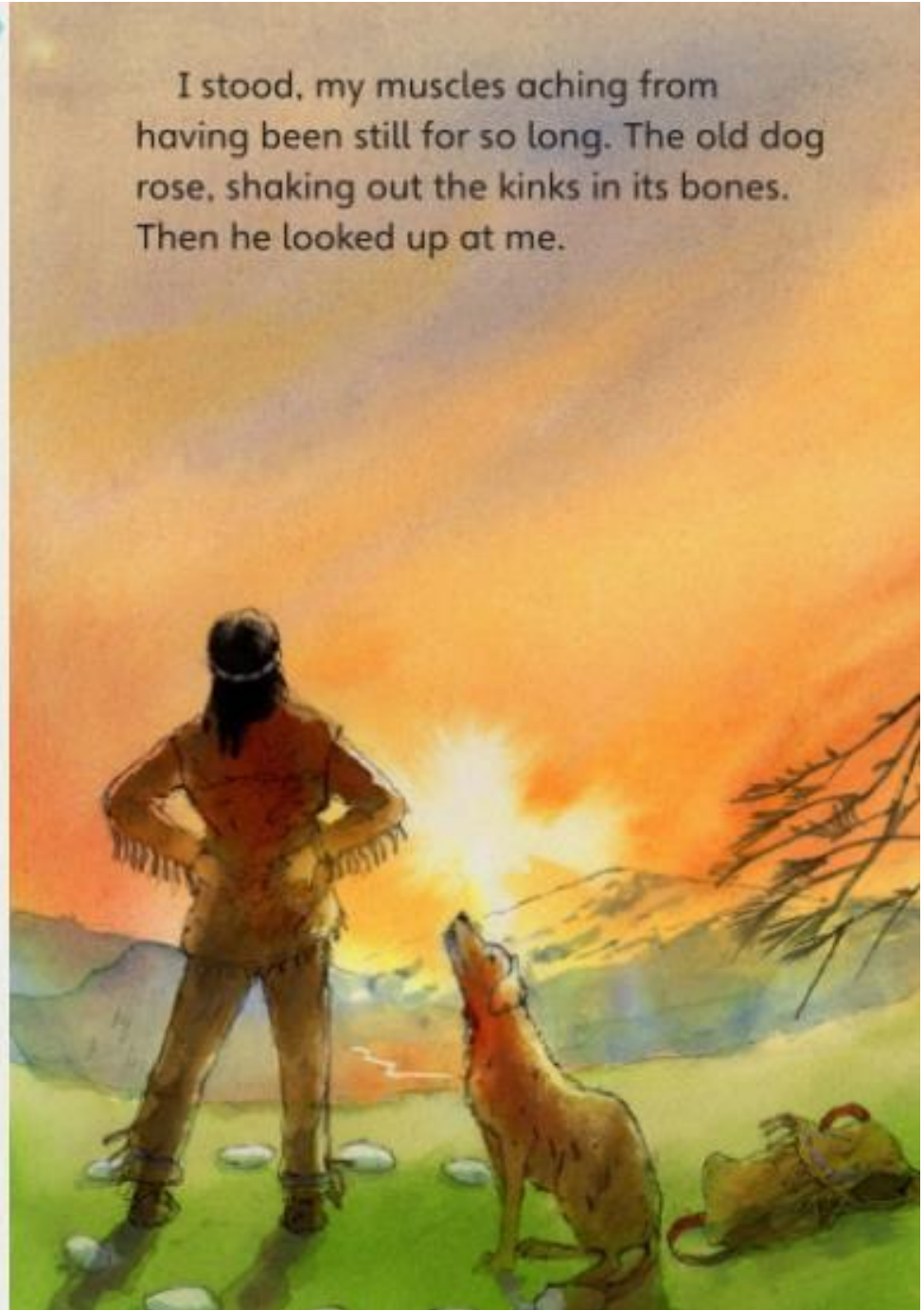
I accepted what had happened. That bear had made me afraid, made me want to run, made me want to quit, but I had not given in to the terror. I had welcomed that fear and made it my own. It had come and gone, just as the bear had come and gone.

The bear had not come to kill me. It was simply on its life journey, just as I was.

I opened my eyes to see the sun glinting over the mountain tops. Night was over. I had made it.



I stood, my muscles aching from having been still for so long. The old dog rose, shaking out the kinks in its bones. Then he looked up at me.



The deep brown eyes twinkled and I smiled and addressed the dog.

"Thank you, *Worthy One*, for being my Spirit Helper. Without you, I would have run from the bear."

I raised my arms to the sky. "Thank you, Creator, for sending me exactly the right Spirit Helper. A dog symbolises guidance and loyalty. I learned from his wisdom and he did not leave me, even when faced with terrible danger."

I patted the dog on the head. "I see now that I was arrogant. You showed me the first night we met when you laid me low in the dust." I thought of how I'd made my mother buy the trade beads for my regalia. "I must apologise to my mother for those beads. It was not about the decorations I wore, but the honour in the dance. And I should have stayed at the clearing chosen by the Elder. I'd have had water. I will remember his words as I carry my heavy stones back down the trail."



The dog made a small noise which sounded suspiciously like a chuckle.

I knelt and hugged my friend. "There is much to learn about being a true warrior and a real man, but I am not there yet. With your wisdom, I hope to be both one day."

Worthy One wagged his tail and I gathered my belongings, ready to start my new life as a warrior-in-training of the Raven People.

