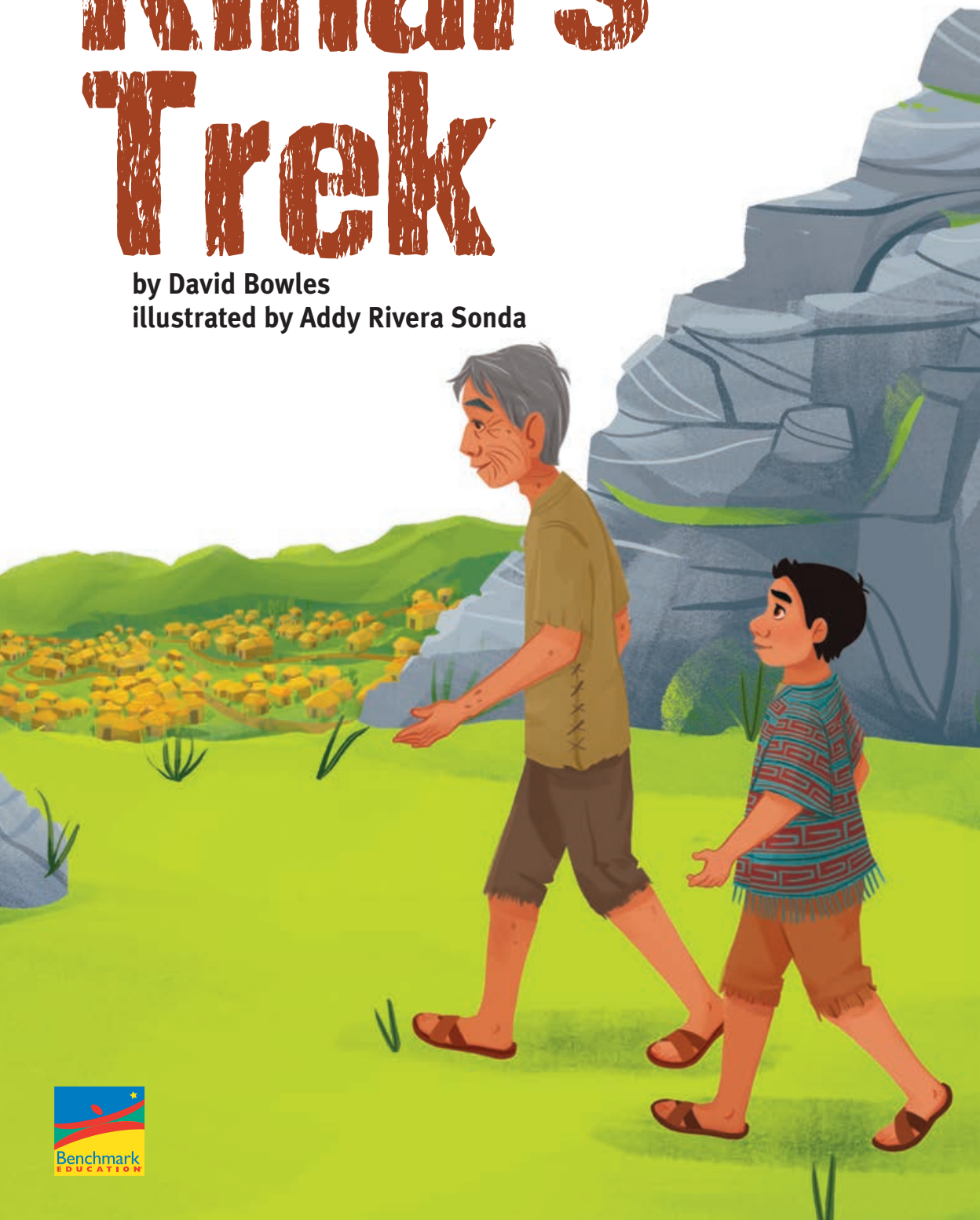


Kinjal's Trek

by David Bowles

illustrated by Addy Rivera Sonda



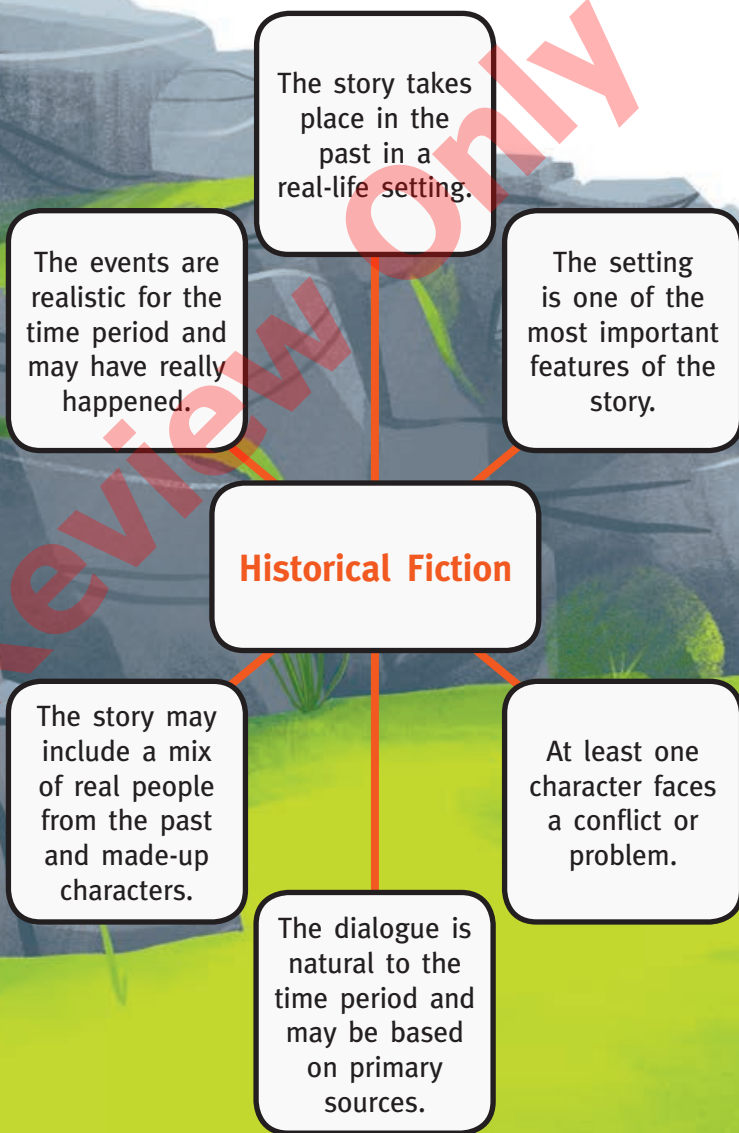
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The Healer's Apprentice

Itzat, the greatest healer in the ancient kingdom of Kabah, shook Kinal awake before dawn.

“Kinal,” she said, “pack up my supplies. We will save our people from this mysterious illness if it means going door to door, from the poorest house to the palace.”

Kinal was Itzat's son. He was also her student and her apprentice. He always wanted to help. Still, he hesitated now, rubbing his tired eyes.



“Just you and me?”

She put her strong hands on his shoulders. “Remember the courage of your father, Onel. He gave his own life to heal this kingdom’s soldiers during the war. We need to help our people as he did.”

Kinal sat up straighter. Although he’d been only a baby during the war and couldn’t remember his father, Kinal had always longed to be just like him.

“Give me a moment,” he said.

Dressing quickly, Kinal filled his mother’s bag with herbs. Next, he drew water from their well.

Itzat and Kinal were lucky to have water at all. Because of the drought, most families had to carry water from the reservoir, a lake by the palace that was filled with drinking water. It was a far walk for water, and the reservoir was almost empty.

As if the lack of rain were not bad enough, the people of the kingdom of Kabah had started getting a mysterious illness, from the humblest family to the king himself—except for the healer and her apprentice.

As the sun rose, they began visiting homes, traveling in a spiral around the kingdom. They started with their neighbors down the road. The family was bedridden. No one had the energy to even stand. So Kinal had to wash clothes and help cook them a meal.

Meanwhile, Itzat brewed tea. After drinking it, the family could at least sit down to eat.

“It’s a start,” she told Kinal. “We’ll return once we’ve visited everyone.”

But there were more than a hundred families in the kingdom of Kabah. Every single house had someone who was sick. Kinal grew more tired after each visit. When they returned home, Kinal went straight to bed.

The next day, they continued their rounds from dawn until dusk. Kinal became more and more exhausted, but he and Itzat still had people to treat.

Soon they reached the Palace of Masks, where the royal family lived. Kinal helped his mother brew enough tea for the entire court. Brewing tea for so many people was a lot of work.

Itzat looked at Kinal and said, "Please bring me some water."

Their jugs were empty. Instead of running home to the well, Kinal decided to take water from the reservoir.

The air was still as he went up the steps to the water's edge. There was barely any water left in the reservoir. Kinal heard rustling in the nearby trees. *Is something there?* he wondered.

Quickly, Kinal filled a jug and took it to his mother. She drank for a long time.

It was a terrible mistake.



Into the Broken Hills

The following morning, Kinal awakened to the sound of groaning.

“Kinal,” Itzat whispered. She was shaking with a fever. “The tea.”

Kinal rushed to prepare the healing tea they had used throughout the kingdom. Kinal realized that his mother, the wisest person he knew, was ill. Kinal was now the last healthy person in the kingdom of Kabah.

When he returned with the tea, his mother whispered, “It’s the water ... in the lake. It’s been poisoned. You must get help. Go to Mayapán. Find Sak Kaan, the healer. Tell him you are my son.”

“But Mayapán is an enemy kingdom!” Kinal said.

“Just trust me,” Itzat muttered. Soon she was fast asleep.

Kinal set out as the glaring sun rose. Soon he crossed the edge of the kingdom. Far in the distance, Mayapán’s forest loomed like a dark shadow.



Sighing, Kinal headed into the Broken Hills—limestone hills, full of dangerous caves, where strange things were said to live.

After hours of climbing up and down hills and slipping on loose rock and dry soil, Kinal heard laughter ahead.

He carefully approached the noise. Kinal found himself close to warriors from Chichén Itzá, his kingdom's sworn enemies.

Before Kinal could run, the captain called to him. “What are you doing out here?”

Kinal fought to still his shaking. “I’m an apprentice healer, sent on a mission by my great teacher.”

The warriors moved closer.

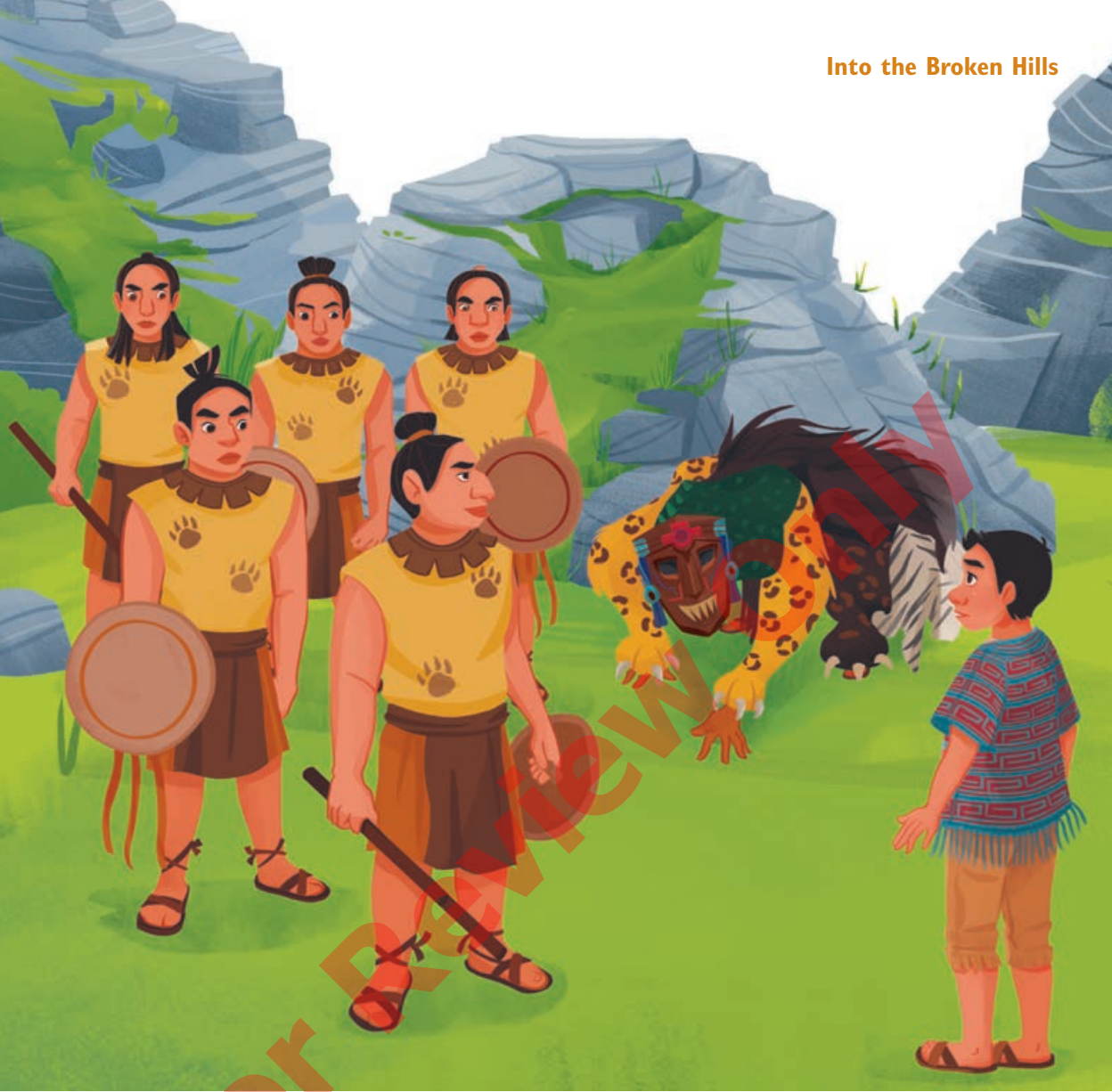
“Ah, the boy we saw at the lake,” the captain said, smiling. “Looking for help for your poisoned people, eh? If they are sending you, they must be very desperate.”

Kinal thought of the movement he had seen in the bushes near the reservoir. Someone poisoned the water, his mother had said. Maybe it had been these very men! He looked the man in the eye. Kinal wanted to be like his father. He wanted to face his fate with honor.

Suddenly, a wild cry came from above. A hairy beast rushed down toward them.

“Retreat!” the warrior shouted. The soldiers ran away. They never glanced back.

Kinal shook as the beast approached. Its terrifying grin was the only thing Kinal could see.



Then the beast stopped. It pulled off its face. Behind that chilling grin was a wrinkled old man.

“A mask!” Kinal said.

“Indeed!” the newcomer replied. “Stolen from the Palace of Masks long ago. It has been useful for scaring off unwanted visitors.”