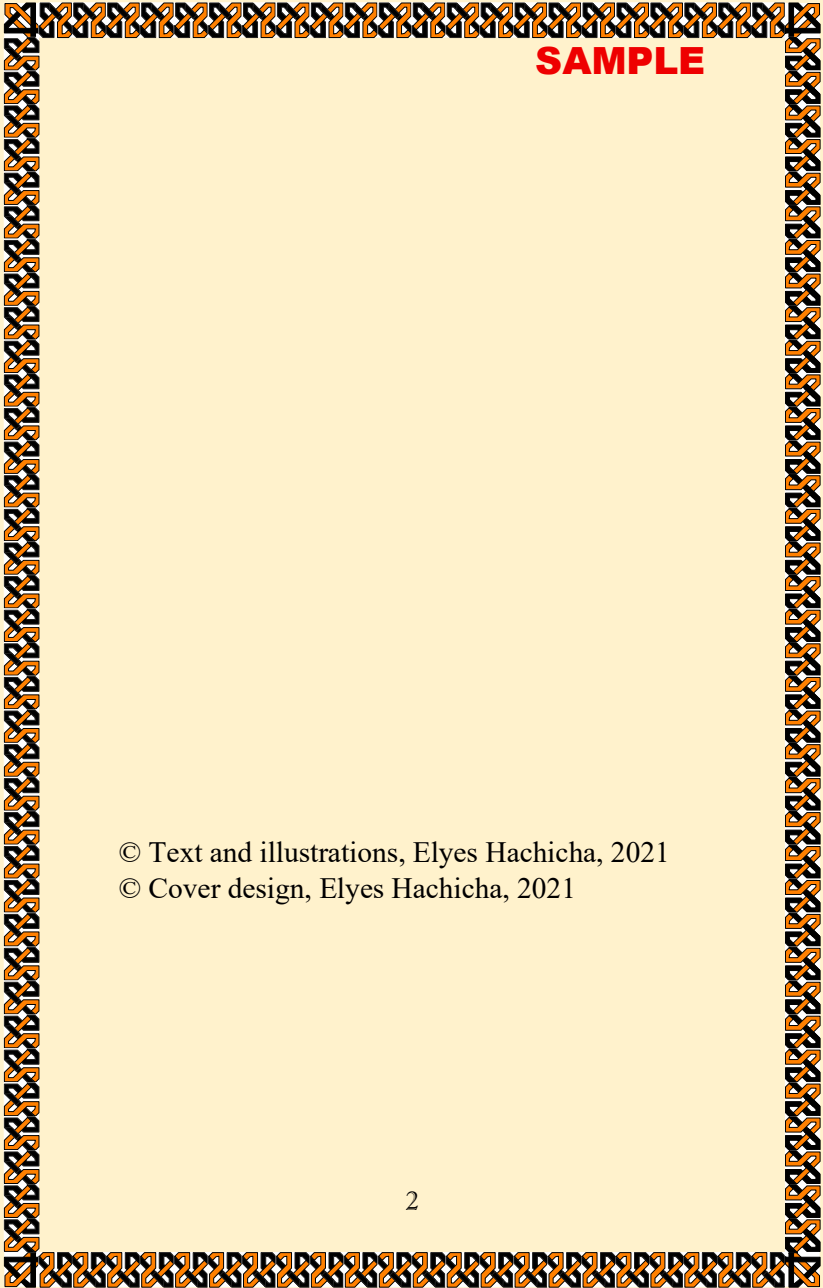


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ELYES HACHICHA



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PROLOGUE

In the middle of the night, the sea began to stir, a storm was rising. Jonas, however, remained very optimistic and reassuring.

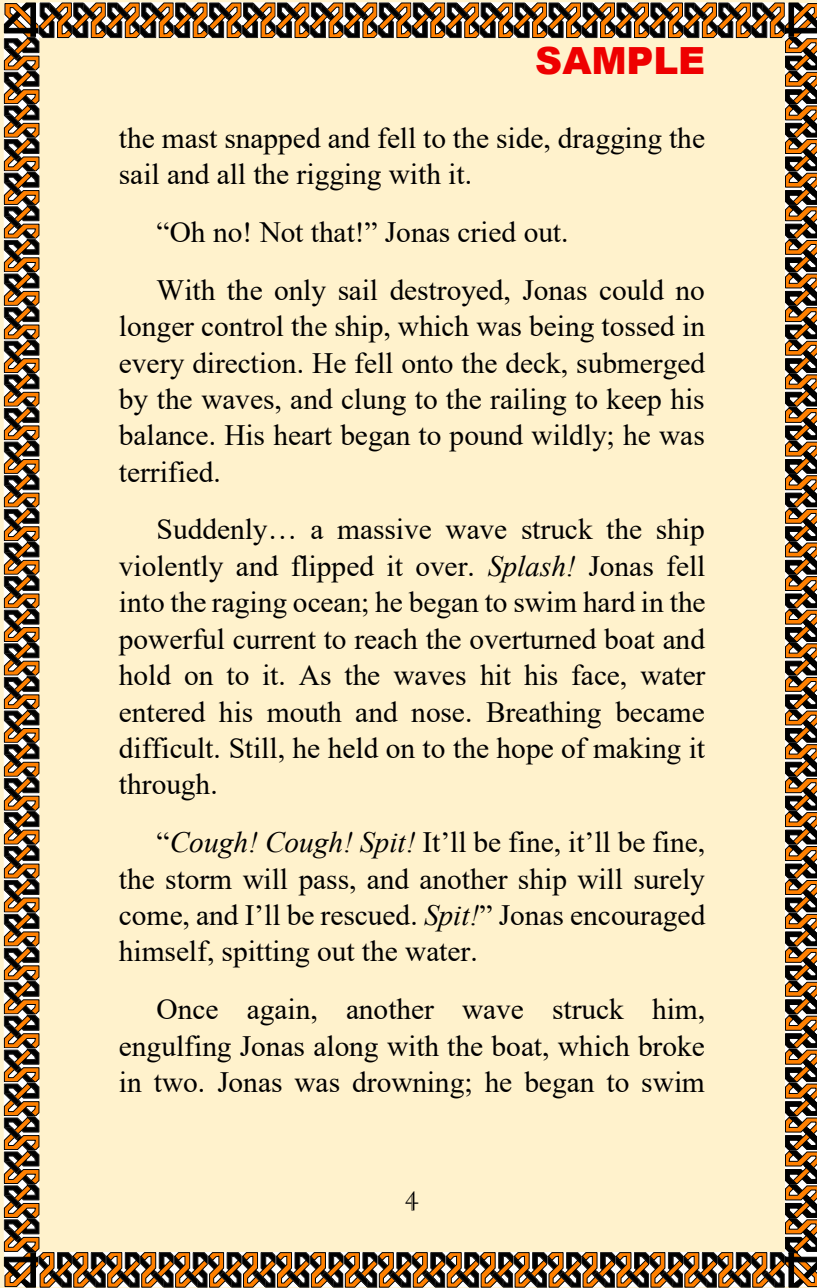
“It should be fine. the storm will pass and I’ll reach the Kingdom of Celesto as planned,” Jonas told himself.

The sky became completely covered with thick clouds. Suddenly, thunder rumbled and a heavy rain began to fall. The frail skiff rocked from left to right in the large waves.

Jonas clung to the rudder, trying to keep control of the boat by adjusting its only sail to better manage the direction of his vessel, which was becoming more and more uncontrollable. The wooden hull of the ship creaked and cracked like never before. It seemed as if it was going to shatter under the violence of the storm.

“It will pass, it will pass. This storm won’t be the one to stop me from reaching the kingdom,” Jonas repeated to reassure himself.

Boom! A bolt of lightning, more violent than the others, struck Jonas’s boat with such force that



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the mast snapped and fell to the side, dragging the sail and all the rigging with it.

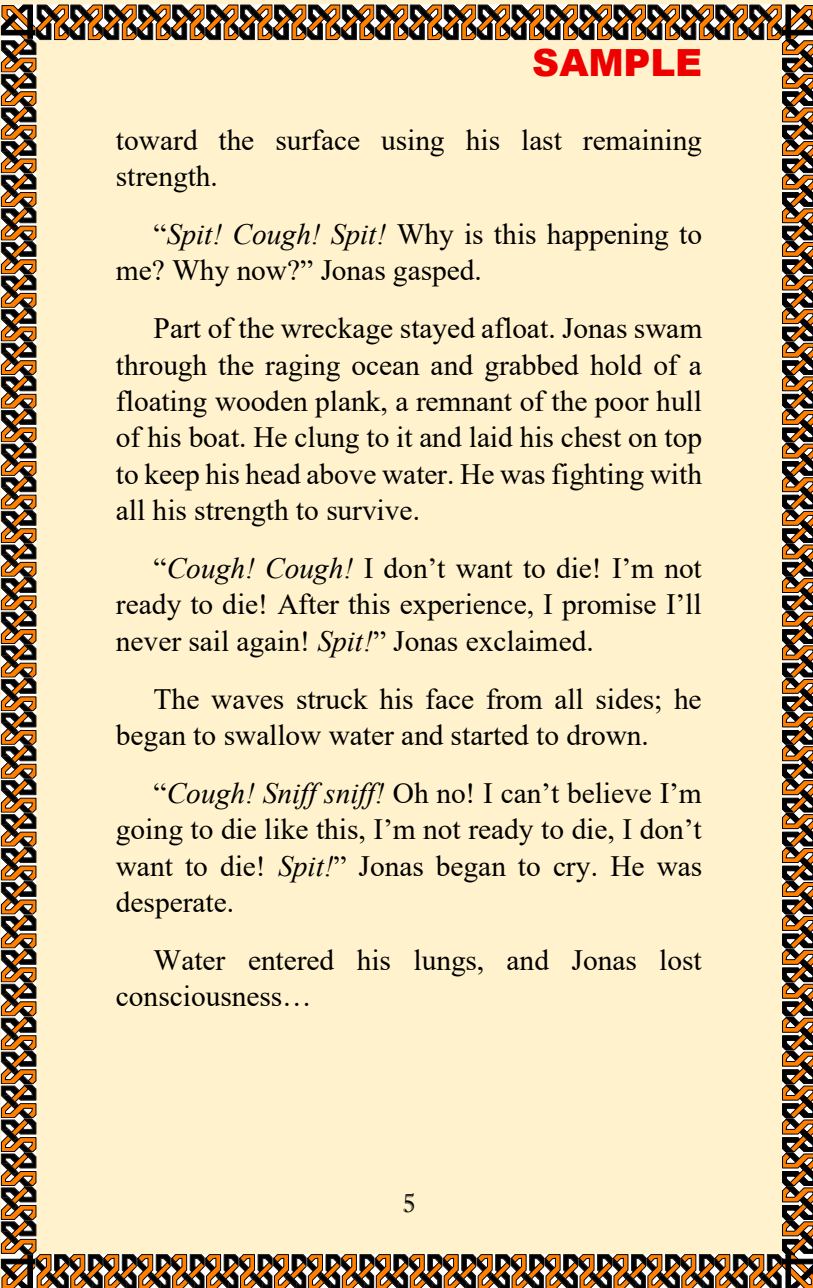
“Oh no! Not that!” Jonas cried out.

With the only sail destroyed, Jonas could no longer control the ship, which was being tossed in every direction. He fell onto the deck, submerged by the waves, and clung to the railing to keep his balance. His heart began to pound wildly; he was terrified.

Suddenly... a massive wave struck the ship violently and flipped it over. *Splash!* Jonas fell into the raging ocean; he began to swim hard in the powerful current to reach the overturned boat and hold on to it. As the waves hit his face, water entered his mouth and nose. Breathing became difficult. Still, he held on to the hope of making it through.

“*Cough! Cough! Spit!* It’ll be fine, it’ll be fine, the storm will pass, and another ship will surely come, and I’ll be rescued. *Spit!*” Jonas encouraged himself, spitting out the water.

Once again, another wave struck him, engulfing Jonas along with the boat, which broke in two. Jonas was drowning; he began to swim



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toward the surface using his last remaining strength.

“Spit! Cough! Spit! Why is this happening to me? Why now?” Jonas gasped.

Part of the wreckage stayed afloat. Jonas swam through the raging ocean and grabbed hold of a floating wooden plank, a remnant of the poor hull of his boat. He clung to it and laid his chest on top to keep his head above water. He was fighting with all his strength to survive.

“Cough! Cough! I don’t want to die! I’m not ready to die! After this experience, I promise I’ll never sail again! Spit!” Jonas exclaimed.

The waves struck his face from all sides; he began to swallow water and started to drown.

“Cough! Sniff sniff! Oh no! I can’t believe I’m going to die like this, I’m not ready to die, I don’t want to die! Spit!” Jonas began to cry. He was desperate.

Water entered his lungs, and Jonas lost consciousness...

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NIGHTMARE

Jonas was not ready to face his fate or accept the truth. He was weak, and he collapsed to the ground and began to cry, “*Sniff sniff!*”

The bells tolled their final hour: *Dong-dong! Dong-dong! Dong-dong!* All the lands on the horizon were swallowed by flames and ravaged by violent earthquakes.

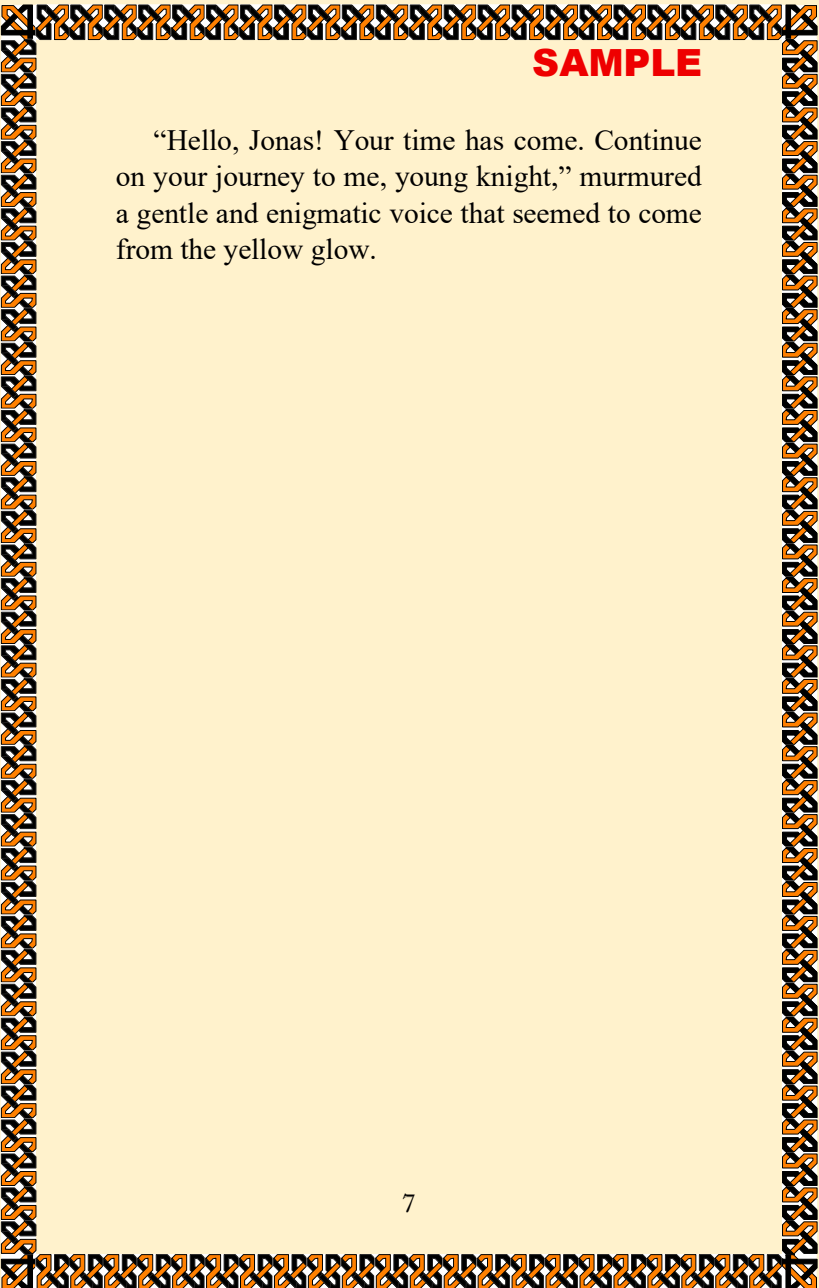
Jonas’s body began to burn.

“*AARRGGGHhhh...*” His voice faded into the flames, muffled by the dull sounds of destruction.

Amid the ringing bells, Jonas’s vision darkened; he could only hear the uproar caused by the comet.

The comet struck the tower in a titanic explosion, completely destroying the island. Everything was reduced to dust. Nothing remained... nothing, except for the last echo of the bells, ringing out one final time: *DOOOOONG... !*

After a moment of deafening silence, Jonas’s vision turned white. A yellow glow suddenly appeared in the middle of his field of vision...



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“Hello, Jonas! Your time has come. Continue on your journey to me, young knight,” murmured a gentle and enigmatic voice that seemed to come from the yellow glow.

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CHAPTER I

The gentle voice startled Jonas awake.

“Wow! What was that nightmare? Oh! It’s already morning! Where am I?”

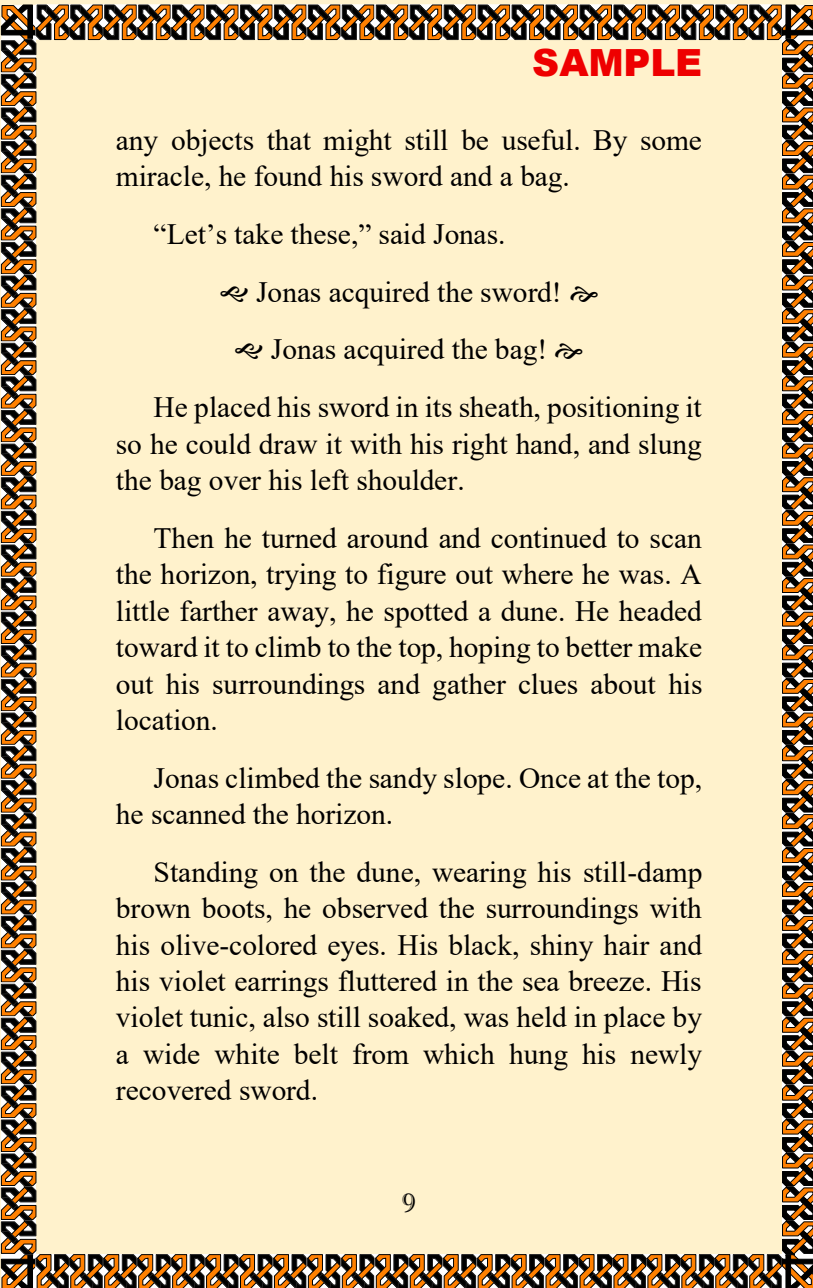
Jonas began patting different parts of his body to make sure he was really alive.

“I can’t believe I made it. I’M ALIVE! I’M ALIVE!”

Jonas stood up. Soaked and covered in sand, he looked around and tried to understand where he had washed ashore. He was on a beach lined with palm trees. Huge rocks were scattered across the sand. Seagulls were gliding overhead. Morning was breaking, the sun was low in the east, and the sea was crystal-clear azure. Only the dull roar of the waves on the shore and the cries of the seagulls could be heard, “*Caw! Caw! Caw !*”

Jonas scanned the coastline and spotted the wreck of his ship a few hundred meters away. He headed toward it to see what was left of his precious vessel.

Once he arrived amid the debris of the hull and what remained of the rigging, Jonas searched for



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any objects that might still be useful. By some miracle, he found his sword and a bag.

“Let’s take these,” said Jonas.

☞ Jonas acquired the sword! ☞

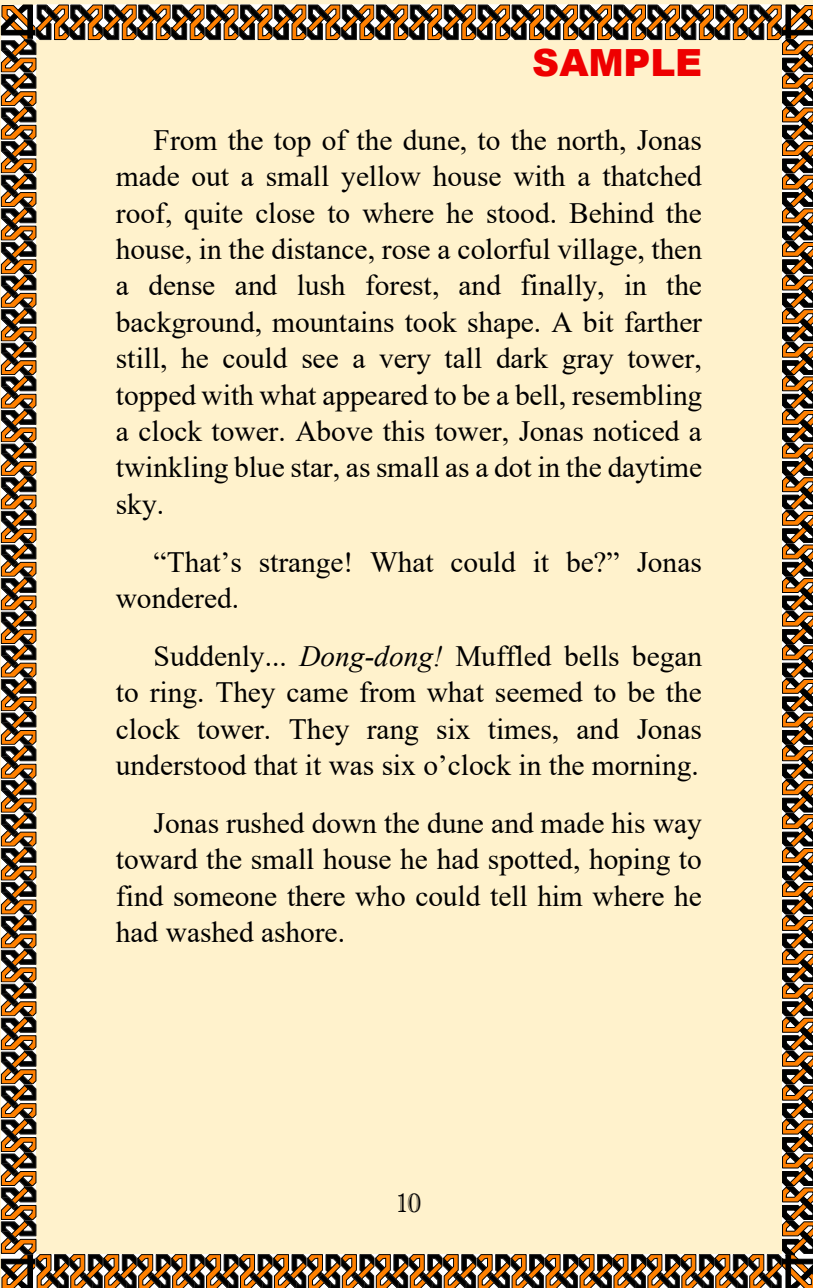
☞ Jonas acquired the bag! ☞

He placed his sword in its sheath, positioning it so he could draw it with his right hand, and slung the bag over his left shoulder.

Then he turned around and continued to scan the horizon, trying to figure out where he was. A little farther away, he spotted a dune. He headed toward it to climb to the top, hoping to better make out his surroundings and gather clues about his location.

Jonas climbed the sandy slope. Once at the top, he scanned the horizon.

Standing on the dune, wearing his still-damp brown boots, he observed the surroundings with his olive-colored eyes. His black, shiny hair and his violet earrings fluttered in the sea breeze. His violet tunic, also still soaked, was held in place by a wide white belt from which hung his newly recovered sword.



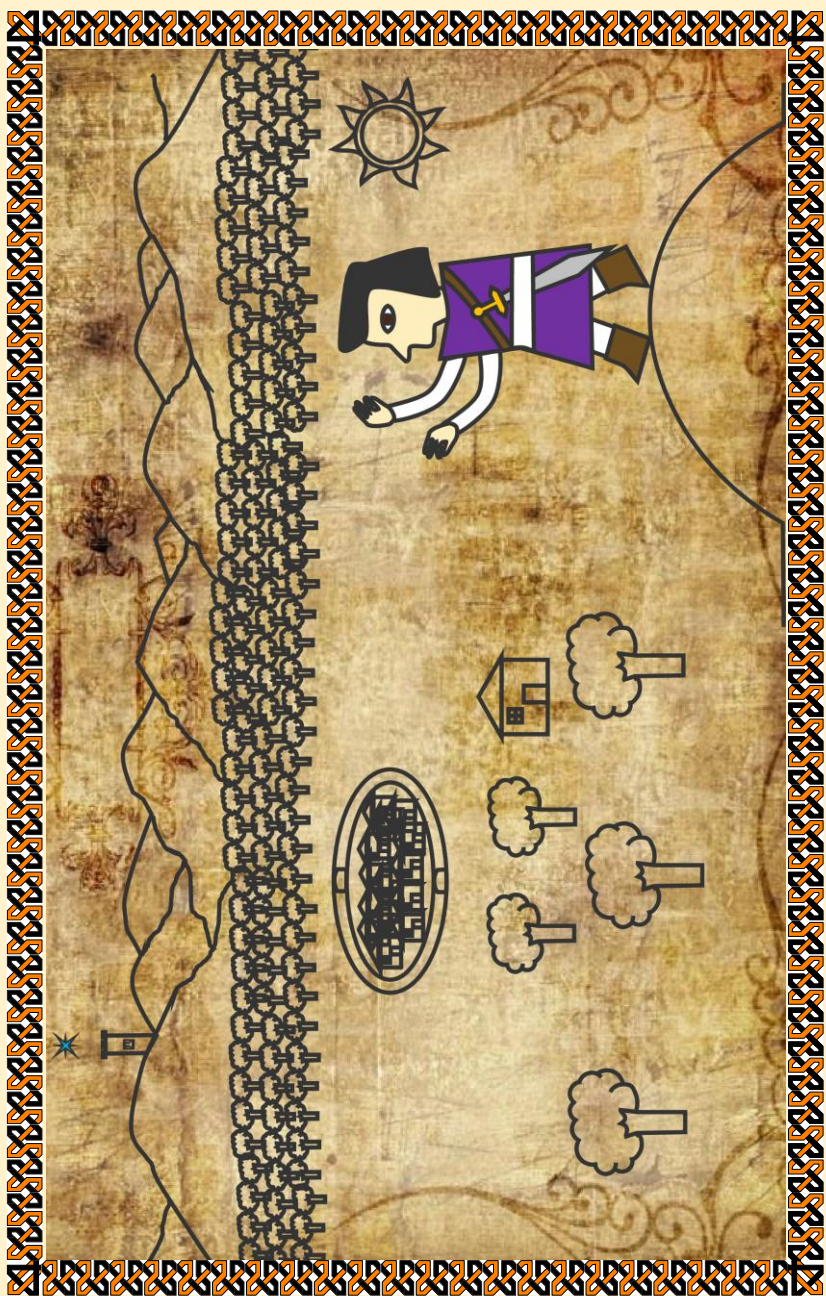
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From the top of the dune, to the north, Jonas made out a small yellow house with a thatched roof, quite close to where he stood. Behind the house, in the distance, rose a colorful village, then a dense and lush forest, and finally, in the background, mountains took shape. A bit farther still, he could see a very tall dark gray tower, topped with what appeared to be a bell, resembling a clock tower. Above this tower, Jonas noticed a twinkling blue star, as small as a dot in the daytime sky.

“That’s strange! What could it be?” Jonas wondered.

Suddenly... *Dong-dong!* Muffled bells began to ring. They came from what seemed to be the clock tower. They rang six times, and Jonas understood that it was six o’clock in the morning.

Jonas rushed down the dune and made his way toward the small house he had spotted, hoping to find someone there who could tell him where he had washed ashore.



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He left the beach and crossed an orchard on his way to the small house. The orchard was full of apple trees, heavy with crisp red apples. Jonas grabbed one to eat along the way. It was so juicy and ripe that he picked three more for his journey.

≈ Jonas collected three red apples! ≈

As he walked through the orchard, savoring his red apple, the day was bright and beautiful; a flurry of seagulls filled the sky with their cries, “Caw! Caw! Caw!”

“If only I could talk to the seagulls and ask them where I am,” Jonas thought.

He reached the small house. A horse was tied nearby, grazing on the grass.

“What a beautiful horse!” Jonas exclaimed.

The mare had a bay coat, a smooth black mane, and her forehead and legs were frosty white. Jonas approached and gently stroked her mane. Then he walked toward the entrance of the house. There was no door, but a heavy curtain served as a closure. Jonas stepped up to it and called out: “Hello? Is anyone there?”

“Yes! Come in!” replied an old lady from inside.

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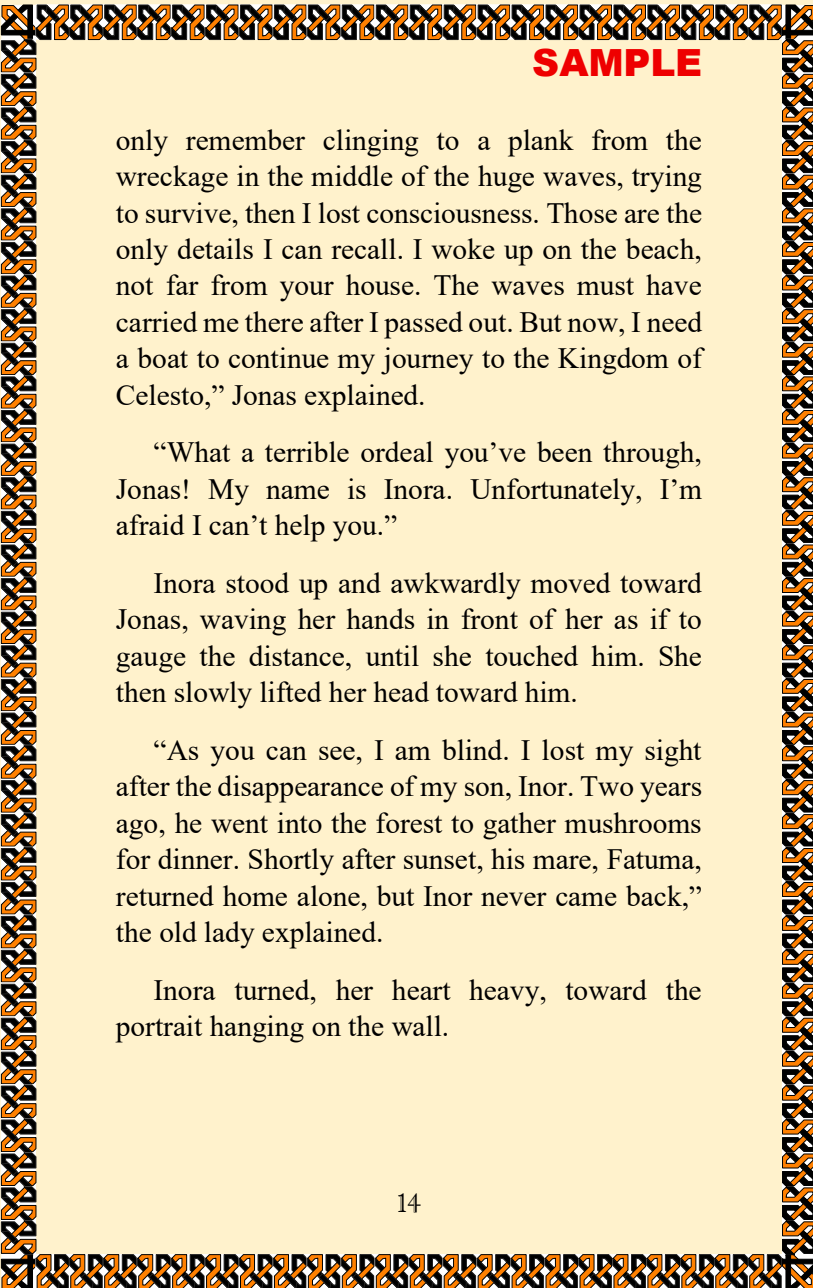
Jonas pulled the curtain aside and entered. Near the only window of the small house, an old lady was sitting on a rocking chair placed by the wall. She was wearing a grey dress, a pink wool sweater, and pink slippers. Her grey hair was twisted into a bun atop her head. Her eyes were fixed on the floor. In one corner, two beds were arranged side by side. In another, a table was set for a meal, with two empty plates facing each other, as if she were expecting someone to eat with. The little house was simply decorated; a pot of delicate yellow flowers sat on the windowsill, and a portrait was hung on the adjacent wall. The canvas was torn, and in a shadowy corner of the room, Jonas could make out that it showed the old lady alongside a young man standing at her side.

“How can I help you, young boy?” asked the old lady.

“My name is Jonas, and I’d like to know where I am.”

“Where do you come from, young boy?” the old lady continued.

“Well... I was sailing toward the Kingdom of Celesto when I got caught in a violent storm last night. The storm sank my ship and destroyed it. I



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only remember clinging to a plank from the wreckage in the middle of the huge waves, trying to survive, then I lost consciousness. Those are the only details I can recall. I woke up on the beach, not far from your house. The waves must have carried me there after I passed out. But now, I need a boat to continue my journey to the Kingdom of Celesto,” Jonas explained.

“What a terrible ordeal you’ve been through, Jonas! My name is Inora. Unfortunately, I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

Inora stood up and awkwardly moved toward Jonas, waving her hands in front of her as if to gauge the distance, until she touched him. She then slowly lifted her head toward him.

“As you can see, I am blind. I lost my sight after the disappearance of my son, Inor. Two years ago, he went into the forest to gather mushrooms for dinner. Shortly after sunset, his mare, Fatuma, returned home alone, but Inor never came back,” the old lady explained.

Inora turned, her heart heavy, toward the portrait hanging on the wall.

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“I’m truly sorry about your son, Inora,” said Jonas with compassion. “What is this place? And who can I ask for help?”

“You are on the Island of Illusions, Jonas,” Inora replied as she turned back to him. “If you’re looking for help, continue north, toward the Tower of Fate. There, you’ll find the Dwarf Village, and perhaps someone there can help you.”

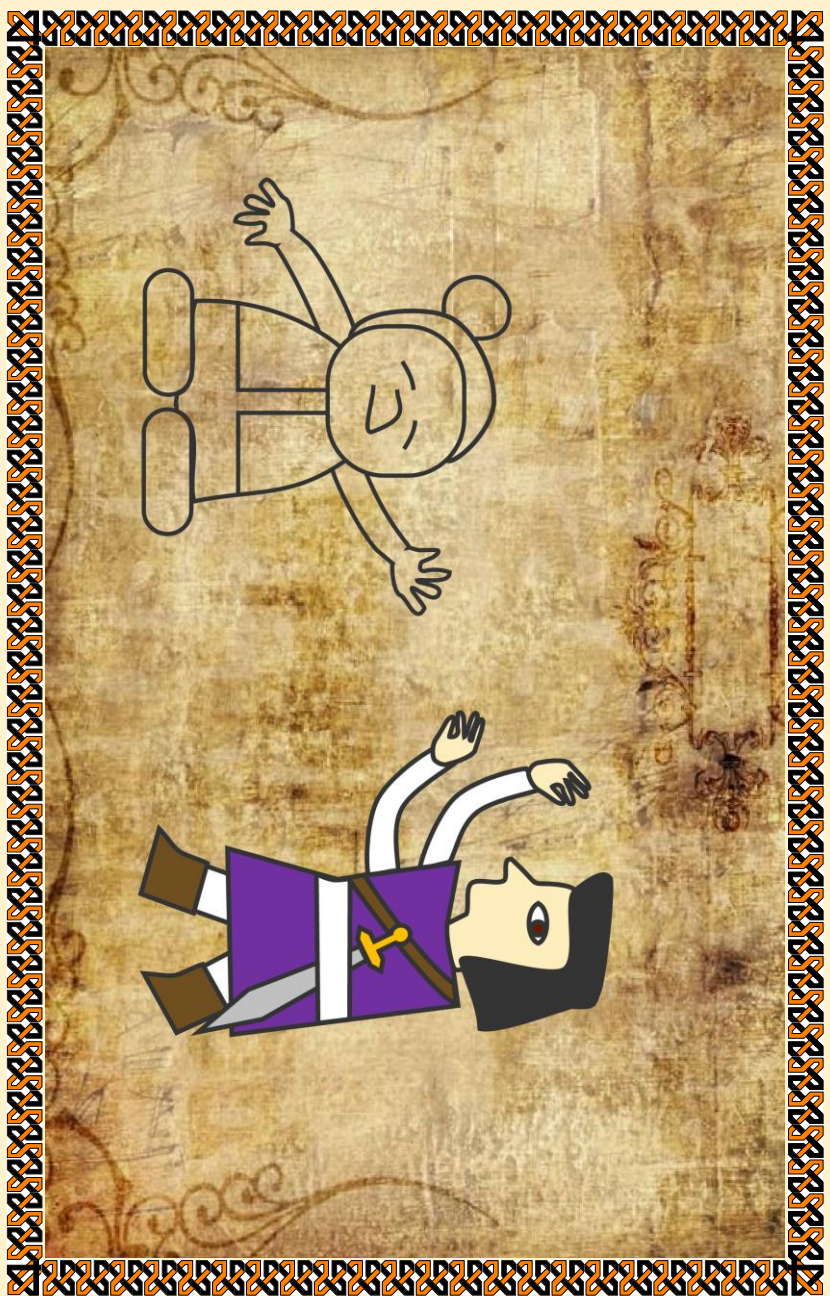
“The Tower of Fate? Is that the tall clock tower behind the mountains?” Jonas asked.

“Yes, that’s the one! If you head in that direction, you’ll reach the Dwarf Village,” Inora repeated.

Intrigued by the bright star in the sky, Jonas asked, “There’s a star shining above the Tower of Fate. Do you know what it is?”

“What bright star? I’ve never seen any star over there. The last time I saw stars was two years ago, with my son Inor,” Inora sighed.

“Maybe Inor will come back one day,” Jonas suggested.



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“Maybe... But sometimes I feel like he’s here with me, like he’s trying to tell me something, but it’s only my imagination,” Inora replied. “Jonas, I’m too old now to take care of Fatuma, my son’s mare, on my own. If you wish, you can take her. She’s a gentle creature. With her, you’ll reach the Dwarf Village faster. It’s the only help I can offer you, but please, take good care of her. Inor loved Fatuma very much...”

“Alright! Thank you so much, Inora, for your offer. I promise to take great care of Fatuma,” Jonas promised.

❧ Jonas acquired Fatuma! ❧

“Goodbye, Inora! And thank you again!” Jonas called out.

Inora lowered her head, let out a soft sigh, and remained silent.

Jonas left the house. He approached the mare, stroked her once more, untied her, then mounted the saddle. Suddenly, he heard a calm and enigmatic male voice behind him, “*Boo! Boo!* Take care of my Fatuma,” the calm voice murmured.

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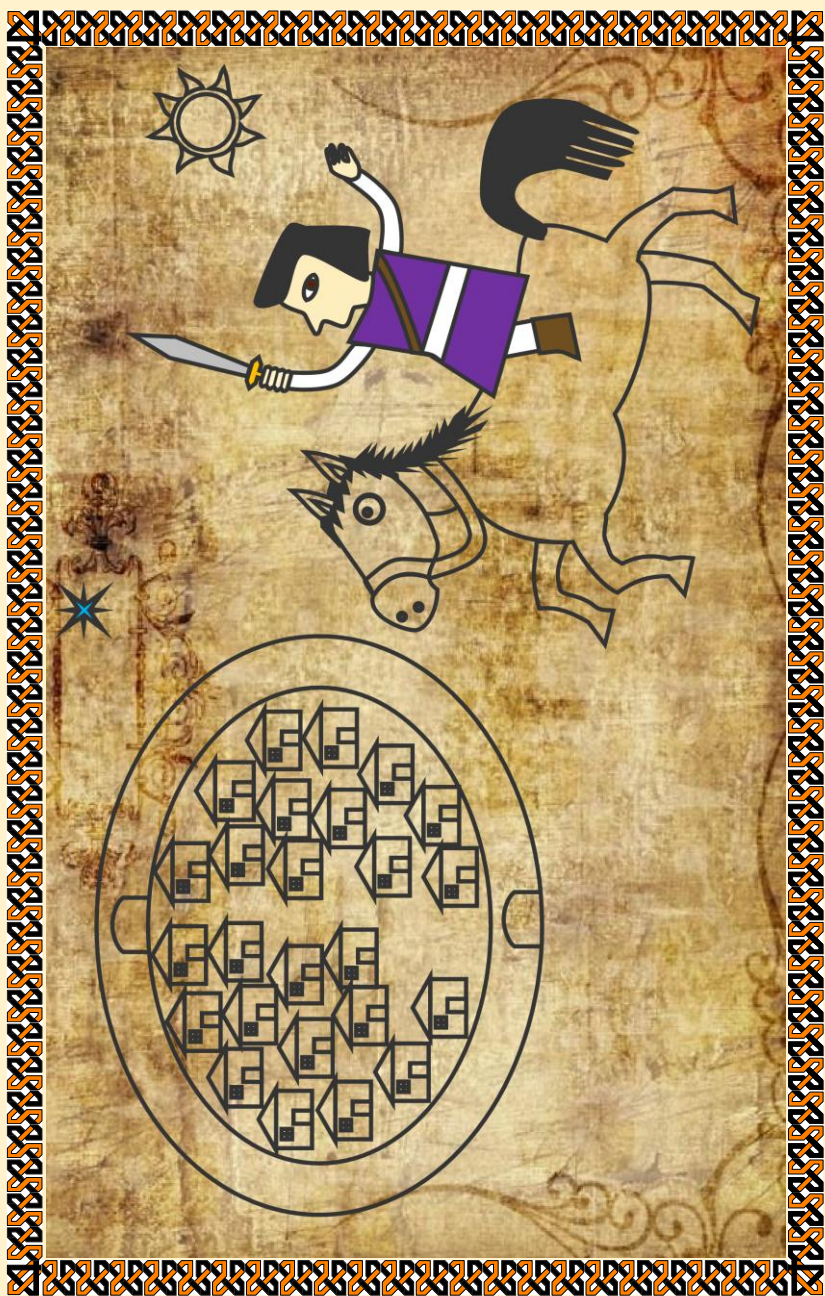
Jonas turned around, but there was no one there, “Hmm... strange,” Jonas said to himself, uncertain.

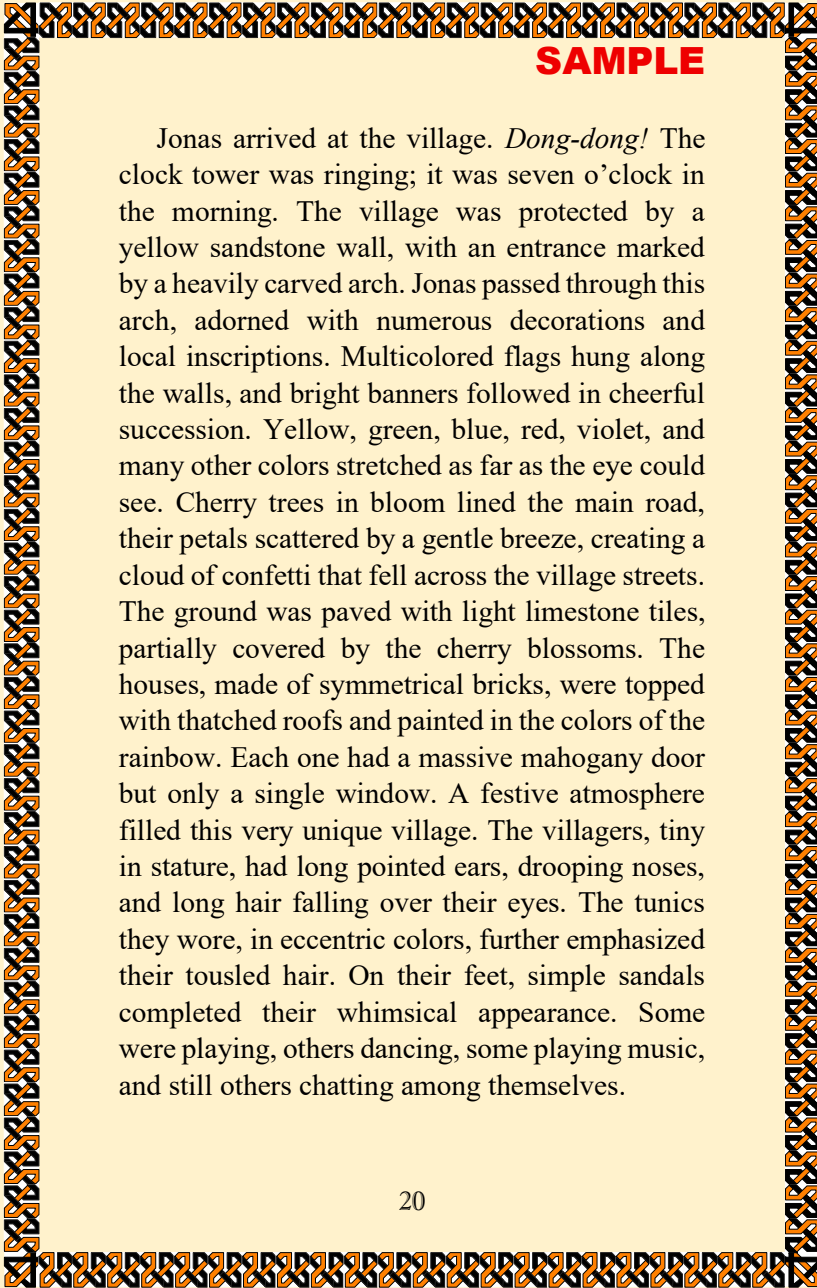
Delighted to be riding his new travel companion, Jonas set off at a gallop toward the north and headed for the Dwarf Village, brandishing his sword.

Jonas had no trouble controlling Fatuma; he was quite used to riding horses.

Along the way, Jonas began to cough lightly, “*Cough! Cough!* I must have caught a chill,” he muttered as he coughed.

The village was not far now. And soon, Jonas reached it...





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Jonas arrived at the village. *Dong-dong!* The clock tower was ringing; it was seven o'clock in the morning. The village was protected by a yellow sandstone wall, with an entrance marked by a heavily carved arch. Jonas passed through this arch, adorned with numerous decorations and local inscriptions. Multicolored flags hung along the walls, and bright banners followed in cheerful succession. Yellow, green, blue, red, violet, and many other colors stretched as far as the eye could see. Cherry trees in bloom lined the main road, their petals scattered by a gentle breeze, creating a cloud of confetti that fell across the village streets. The ground was paved with light limestone tiles, partially covered by the cherry blossoms. The houses, made of symmetrical bricks, were topped with thatched roofs and painted in the colors of the rainbow. Each one had a massive mahogany door but only a single window. A festive atmosphere filled this very unique village. The villagers, tiny in stature, had long pointed ears, drooping noses, and long hair falling over their eyes. The tunics they wore, in eccentric colors, further emphasized their tousled hair. On their feet, simple sandals completed their whimsical appearance. Some were playing, others dancing, some playing music, and still others chatting among themselves.

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“I’ve seen this place before...” thought Jonas, overcome by a strange feeling of déjà vu.

Jonas approached a group of three musicians who were playing a cheerful and lively tune while dancing in harmony. They had formed a circle around a snake in a wicker basket, captivated by their music.

Jonas dismounted to speak with them. The villagers were so small they barely reached his knees. One was playing a brown violin; he had red hair and wore a royal blue tunic. The second, who was playing a drum with a red and white skin, had orange hair and wore an emerald tunic. The third, finally, was playing a banana-yellow flute; he had pink hair and wore a yellow tunic matching his instrument. Jonas bent down to speak to them, “Hey there! Is this the Dwarf Village?”

*
**

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