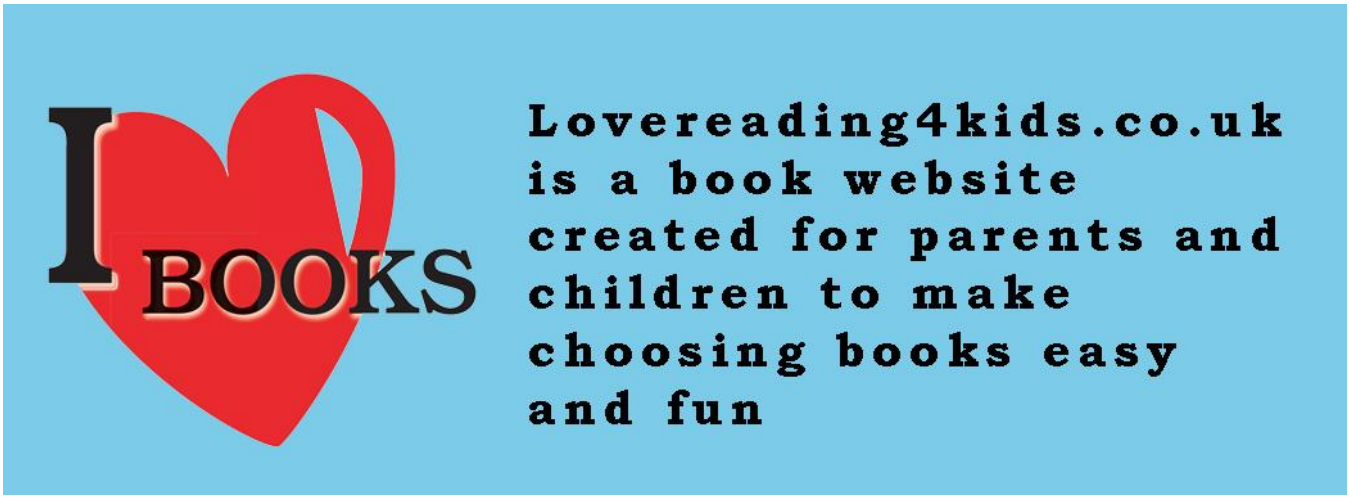


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Finding Gobi

Written by

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Chapter One

"Hey, check out the dog!" a man shouted from somewhere in the crowd. "Maybe it's here for the race!"

"Is that right, girl?" another man asked, bending down to scratch her behind the ears. "Are you here to run with us?"

The dog didn't know what to make of all this. There were a lot of people, more than she would have expected out here away from town and right on the edge of the desert. Most of them were dressed funny, but they were nice. Many of the runners stopped to pet her, and more than a few gave her scraps of food.

She was hungry. She was always hungry. She couldn't remember a time when she hadn't been hungry. These people seemed to like her, and when she danced around them they fed her. So she danced. And got fed. And everyone was happy.

Then she saw him. He wasn't feeding her. He wasn't laughing or shouting. He wasn't even standing with most of the other people. He was off to the side, shifting back and forth on his big feet. He was tall and skinny, and dressed all in bright yellow. He looked funny, but he wasn't smiling.

The dog didn't know what to make of this tall man. But she decided that she wanted to find out more about him.

★★★

"Well, hello there," Dion Leonard muttered, glancing down at the small bundle of sandy-coloured fur bounding around his feet. "Where did you come from?"

She wasn't a very big dog, he noticed. She was small and compact, and she had big dark eyes and tufts of fur around her mouth that made it look like she had a moustache and beard. He'd seen her with a bunch of the other runners earlier, doing tricks for food. But for some reason she'd singled him out.

It was probably his gear. Dion's running clothes and even his shoes were all bright yellow. He knew he probably looked like a neon light.

He reached down and patted the dog, but he didn't have time to give her too much attention. Today's portion of the race was about to start, and he needed to be ready.

This six-stage ultra race would stretch over seven days and cover almost 155 miles. Dion had never been to China before, but he had done other multi-stage races like this. He used to be good at them. Then he'd hurt his leg. It had been a while since he'd entered a race, and he was worried. This was his last chance, he figured. If he didn't do well in this race, he might as well just quit completely.

He didn't want to quit though. He wanted to compete well – not necessarily to come in first, he wasn't expecting that, but to make it into the top handful, at least. Even placing fourth would be enough to show that he could still do this.

Yesterday had been the first day and he had come in third, so that was an excellent start. But in order to stay in that top handful, he needed to concentrate. And that meant not spending any more time with somebody's dog, no matter how cute she was.

"Better get back to your owner now," he murmured, leaning over to pet her one last time. She looked up at

him with those big eyes, almost like she understood him, and barked once. But she didn't go away.

"Take your positions!" one of the race organisers shouted. Everyone tensed and moved to the starting line, completing final stretches. Dion was already done with all of that. He just made sure his shoes were tied tight and his backpack was securely on, and concentrated on the path up ahead. Little pink flags marked the way.

The starting gun sounded, and they were off! Dion didn't try to push past people. This wasn't that kind of race. You had to keep up a good pace, but it was more about endurance than bursts of speed. He knew enough to pace himself. The racers who sprinted out in front now would be worn out later. He had plenty of time.

He concentrated on his footing and his pace but was startled when a small blur appeared by his feet. It was the dog! She hadn't gone away, and now she was running alongside him! Her little legs moved fast, but she was keeping pace.

Despite himself, Dion laughed. "All right," he told her. "If you want to come with me, you can. As long as you can keep up."