THE BOOK OF SECRETS

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THE BOOK OF SECRETS



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This book is for Ellie Reeves.

THE BOOK OF SECRETS



Chapter One

A QUEST

BOY RODE the black horse to the top of the sand dune and pulled her to a halt. He sat for a moment, gazing down across the vast stretch of desert that lay ahead of him – untold miles leading onwards for as far as the eye could see. The day was very nearly over, the sun close to setting in a tumble of blood-red clouds on the horizon, and Boy still hadn't found anywhere to make camp for the night.

He had ridden hard since first light, stopping only once to snatch a few scraps of food and a mouthful of water. He was well aware that his horse, Belle, was in need of rest, but he was

eager to put as many miles behind him and his hometown as he could before the day was out. He was not yet far enough away from Serafin to believe that Master Titus might not come in pursuit. He feared that possibility more than anything else that might lurk in the vast, unknown desert that lay before him. Master Titus was not a man to be slighted easily and was sure to be plotting revenge. Boy realised he could not hope to ride for much longer. His main need was to find somewhere to spend the night if he didn't want Belle to collapse under him.

He was just on the point of giving up and admitting that the top of this dune was as good a place as any, when his keen, blue eyes picked up something in the middle distance – a thin plume of grey smoke rising into the darkening sky. Boy noticed a couple of dark smudges close to the source of the smoke. He stared intently, letting the shapes come into focus. Two men, he decided, and the bigger smudges a short distance behind them . . . horses? He couldn't be sure but the thought of possible company tempted him onwards. It was many days since he'd passed conversation with anyone. He clicked his heels gently into Belle's flanks and urged her on, over the crest of the dune and down the slope beyond. Belle whinnied in alarm as her front legs sank into the white sand and for an instant, she was in danger of tumbling over, but she managed to right herself and soon, she had reached the bottom of the slope and was toiling forward across more level ground.

As they rode, Boy thought back to the stables in Serafin, where he had lived and worked for the past six years. After the untimely death of his parents, when he was still a child, he'd found himself alone and thrown onto the tender mercies of the people who ruled Serafin. The town elders had quickly decided that he needed to earn his keep and he had been apprenticed to Master Titus, the town stable master, to be taught a useful trade. Titus was a hard man, who thought nothing of using his horsewhip on anyone who was too slow to follow orders. As a consequence, Boy's back was traced with the lines of old scars that paid testament to this.

Of course, he had once had a proper name – the one his parents had given him at birth – but somehow, over the years, it had fallen into misuse and he had eventually resorted to the thing that every visitor to the stables called him. Boy. As in, 'you Boy, take this horse and feed him,' or, 'Boy! Bring me that shovel and be quick about it!' or, if he was particularly unlucky, 'I am going to beat you, Boy, until you learn better manners.'

From his earliest days at the stables, Boy had nurtured an escape plan – something he'd developed over the years. First, he'd encouraged the people he worked with to think that he was stupid. He had never revealed the fact that his father had taught him to read from an early age or that it was a skill he still practised in secret at every opportunity. Moreover, every single bit of gelt he'd managed to get hold of, he'd put away in

a secret place, planning for the day when he was finally ready to make his bid for freedom. Every night, by the light of an oil lamp – when he knew that all the others were fast asleep – he'd read and reread the one thing that his father had left him; the same book that he now carried in a hidden compartment of his saddle. The *Book of Secrets*.

He and Belle were drawing rapidly closer to the campfire now and in the dying light, he could make out two cloaked figures, seated on rocks in front of it. They busied themselves with what must have been their evening meal. They had found themselves a decent spot – a declivity in the sand, ringed by a half circle of large boulders. Boy couldn't see the men's faces and it occurred to him that they were complete strangers who might not appreciate being visited by a traveller. He had been so long without human company that he decided to be bold and approached the fire. He instinctively dropped one hand to rest on the hilt of the sword which he wore in a leather scabbard at his waist. It was carried mostly for show. He was no great shakes as a swordsman; there had never been anybody to teach him the moves, but he knew it wasn't wise to set off across the great plains of Sonalia without some kind of weapon at his side. This one had been "borrowed" from the armoury at the back of the stables. Sure enough, he could see now that there were two horses tethered a short distance behind the men and what looked like a pack mule. The animals were

eating from nosebags and seemed oblivious to his approach.

He kept riding and soon, he was too close to think about calling it off, so he let out a polite cough.

The men leapt to their feet and span around to face Boy, reaching for their own swords and staring challengingly towards him. The smaller of them regarded him thoughtfully for a moment and then looked quickly around, as if to assure himself that the newcomer wasn't the leader of a gang of brigands, intent on robbery. He was a thin, wiry fellow, his face clean-shaven with dark eyes peering out from under a wide-brimmed hat. After a few moments he seemed reassured, his lips curving into a welcoming smile. The second man, who was a head-and-shoulders taller than his companion, was less friendly. He had big, impassive features and a neatly trimmed, black beard. He wore no hat and his dark hair was no more than a short stubble on his skull. He glared at Boy as though considering whether he should tell him to clear off or simply run forward and strike him to the ground. Boy lifted his hands where the two men could see them.

'I'm just passing through,' he assured them, trying to sound a lot calmer than he felt. 'I mean you no harm.'

The shorter man's smile turned into a cheerful grin. 'No worries, friend,' he purred. 'You startled us for a moment, that's all. Please, climb down from that splendid mount and rest yourself.'

Boy hesitated. 'I wouldn't want to be any trouble,' he said.

'No trouble at all,' said the man. 'In a place this lonely, we should all be friends.' He glanced at his companion. 'Isn't that right, Kaleb?'

The big man's bearded face didn't change its stony expression. He grunted and took his huge hand away from his sword. He turned back to the fire, kneeling beside a battered, black pan that hissed enticingly over the flames.

'Put on another rasher for our guest,' suggested the small man. 'I'm willing to venture that he's hungry.' He took a couple of steps forward and bowed from the waist. 'I am Gordimo of Ackitara,' he said, 'and I am at your service.'

Boy decided that all was well. He relaxed, dismounted from Belle and stood for a moment, stretching his aching muscles.

'You have ridden a long way,' said Gordimo. It wasn't a question so much as an observation.

Boy nodded. 'From Serafin,' he said.

'Ah, I know it well! A fine desert town. They have very good bazaars if memory serves me correctly. Haven't been there in years though.' He studied Boy for a moment as though taking in every detail. 'And where, I wonder, is a young lad like you heading so far from home?'

'To Ravalan,' said Boy.

Gordimo's bushy eyebrows lifted slightly and briefly disappeared behind the brim of his hat. 'A magnificent city,' he

said. 'That's quite a journey for a youngster such as yourself.'

'Not so young,' Boy assured him. 'I'm fifteen, nearly sixteen years.' He turned and reached into his saddlebags to get Belle some oats to eat. He sprinkled a couple of handfuls into a nosebag and hitched it into position around her head.

'A fine age,' said Gordimo. 'I fondly remember those years myself, though as you can no doubt see, it was a *very* long time ago.' He chuckled at his own poor joke, then gestured impatiently. 'Well, come along and settle yourself by the fire, before what little fuel we have is extinguished. We have some fine coffee with us and you are more than welcome to enjoy a cup.'

'You are very kind,' said Boy. He followed Gordimo to the meagre fire and settled himself cross-legged in the sand. He saw that Kaleb had indeed thrown another rasher of tunnel-rat meat into the pan and was giving it an encouraging prod with a fork. 'I . . . I'm afraid I can't pay you for the food,' added Boy, awkwardly. 'I have very little money.'

'My dear fellow, don't give it a second thought.' Gordimo settled himself a short distance away from Boy and arranged his cloak carefully around him. 'You are our honoured guest. Here, Kaleb, pour us a couple of cups of that coffee, will you? Our young friend must be parched.'

Kaleb grunted again, but using a filthy-looking rag, he lifted a metal jug from the flames and poured dark brown liquid into a couple of grubby tin cups. He passed them over. Gordimo

handed one to Boy and then seemed to realise something. 'You must think me very rude,' he said. 'I haven't even asked your name.'

'Ah, no, you haven't. It's Boy. People call me Boy.'

Gordimo looked puzzled. 'What sort of a name is that?' he asked.

'The only one I answer to, I'm afraid.' Boy sipped at the coffee. It was very bitter and, he thought, strong enough to halt a stampeding buffalo in its tracks, but after such a long ride, it was exactly what he needed.

Gordimo seemed to consider for a moment and then chuckled.

'What's wrong?' asked Boy.

'Well, I was just thinking. The name suits you *now*, but how will it seem when you're my age? Or even older. Perhaps then you'll simply change it to *Man*.'

Boy smiled. 'I hadn't really thought about that,' he admitted. 'I did have another name when I was little, so I shall perhaps go back to using that.'

Gordimo looked interested but he didn't press Boy and, for some reason he couldn't quite fathom, Boy was reluctant to share the information. He never liked talking about his former life.

'So, what takes you to Ravalan?' asked Gordimo.

Boy pointed to Belle, who was still eating her oats.

'*She* does,' he said.

Gordimo smiled. 'Yes, and as I have already observed, she's a fine-looking mount. Must have cost you more than a few gelts.'

Boy tried not to look guilty. The truth was he'd kind of "borrowed" Belle along with the sword and had left a note for Master Titus, promising to pay him five gold crowns when he returned. He didn't really like thinking about that. Whenever he did, he couldn't help picturing his owner's furious face and it wasn't a pretty picture. Boy was also painfully aware that people who stole horses tended to end up hanging from a length of rope in the market square of Serafin, where the crows could peck at their lifeless bodies.

'That's not really what I meant,' added Gordimo, as though sensing Boy's unease. 'I was asking the reason for going to Ravalan.'

'Oh, I see,' said Boy and felt suddenly evasive. 'No particular reason,' he said. 'I . . . just wanted to see it. I want to be there for the Moon of Elnis.'

'Anything to do with the great competition?' asked Kaleb, speaking for the first time in a deep, gravelly voice.

'Competition?' echoed Gordimo, looking baffled. 'What competition?'

Kaleb gave Gordimo a scornful look. 'You must know about it, unless you've spent the last few months with your head buried in the sand.'

'Apparently I must have,' said Gordimo.

'Everybody's talking about it,' continued Kaleb. 'I can't believe you haven't heard it mentioned. The competition set by Queen Gertrude! They say people from all corners of the known world are making their way there. Inventors, wizards, magicians – all sorts.'

Gordimo still seemed puzzled. He looked at Boy. 'Is your journey anything to do with that?' he asked quietly.

'Umm . . . could be,' said Boy, wishing somebody would change the subject. He had always found it hard to lie to people. 'I mean, while I'm there I might . . . you know, have a quick look and see what's going on.'

'Tell me more about it,' suggested Gordimo.

'Er . . . well, as I understand it, Queen Gertrude decided that she would have a competition,' explained Boy. 'It's open to anyone and everyone. She's looking for new ideas.'

Gordimo frowned. 'How do you mean?' he asked.

'She's offering a prize of ten thousand gold crowns to the person who can come up with the best invention – something that has never been seen before.'

'Ten thousand!' Now, Gordimo was most definitely interested. 'But that's a fortune! What kind of an idea is she after?'

'She only set one rule,' Boy told him. 'That whatever new idea people brought to her, it must be one that would change people's lives for the better.'

Kaleb snorted. 'Hah! She doesn't want much for her money,

does she? Who in the world could possibly think of an idea like that?'

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Then, Gordimo gave Boy a sly look. 'You must think you're in with a chance,' he said. 'Otherwise, why undertake such a long and arduous journey?'

Boy shrugged. 'Like I said, I just thought I'd go along and see what's what.'

'All that way? On a whim? There must be more to it than that.'

'Well, er . . . maybe I *do* have something,' admitted Boy.

'Something you've invented?' prompted Kaleb.

'Not exactly. Something my father came up with . . . or at least, something he . . . started.'

'Then why didn't he finish it?' asked Gordimo.

Boy frowned. 'He disappeared,' he said. 'When I was a little boy. He and my mother. They just vanished. Nobody seems to know . . .' His voice trailed away. 'They were away from home when it happened. I'd been given into the care of my aunt, while my parents were away, but . . . well, she couldn't afford the expense of looking after a child so I was sent to work for my living. But . . .'

'Yes?' murmured Gordimo.

'My father left me . . . some ideas. It is all I have of him.'

'Ideas?' Gordimo looked disgusted, as though he couldn't think of a more dismal present to leave to a child. 'Something he'd written down?'

'Not exactly.' Boy felt alarmed that Gordimo was already so close to the truth. 'Jus things we talked about. You see, my father was a scientist . . .'

'A what?' Gordimo seemed unfamiliar with the word.

'That's a man who knows how the world works,' said Boy. 'A man who tries to uncover its mysteries and find ways of helping other people to understand them.'

'Like a magician?' suggested Kaleb, stirring the food in the pan.

'No, quite the opposite, really. Science isn't magic, even if it sometimes seems as though it must be. My father outlined ideas he'd had for . . . well, for making impossible things happen. There was one particular idea that gripped me. My father hadn't quite got it right when he vanished, but he was close. I worked on it and added some ideas of my own and over the years, I finally finished what he'd started and it works. It really works.'

'Amazing!' cried Gordimo. Well done, lad, but er . . . what is it, exactly?'

'Ah well, I can't tell you that,' said Boy. 'Obviously, it has to be kept a secret.'

There was another long silence. Gordimo laughed.

'Is that it?' he cried. 'Is that what you'll say to Queen Gertrude when she asks to see your wonderful invention? That it's a secret. That'll go down well."

'No, of course not. I'll show *her*. Only . . .' He made an apologetic gesture. 'No offence, but I've only just met you two.'

'Ah, I see.' Gordimo shook his head. 'You don't feel we're to be trusted.'

'I didn't say that!' Boy felt awkward now, particularly after they'd been so welcoming to him. 'But you must understand, I . . . I need to keep this to myself. I mean, this could be life-changing.'

'Of course. Absolutely. Say no more.' Gordimo seemed to suddenly lose interest in the subject 'Well, if that food's ready, we may as well eat,' he said. 'I'm sure our honoured guest must be more than ready to fill his belly at our expense, so . . .'

'Oh, no, please, I hope you're not offended! I mean, of course I'd *like* to be able to show you my invention, but . . .'

'Not a problem. Here, Kaleb, give our guest the biggest rasher, will you? I'd say he looks like he could do with some extra nourishment. He'll need to keep his strength up for his secret competition.'

A slab of sizzling meat was dutifully slapped onto a tin plate and handed to Boy. He took it sheepishly. 'Now look, I really didn't mean to . . .'

'Please, don't give it another thought.' Gordimo waved a hand in dismissal, then leaned over and lifted a leather gourd from beside the fire. 'I dare say you'll take a shot of spiced grog in your coffee?' he ventured. 'It can get very cold out on these plains at night and this will help to keep the old circulation going.'

'Well, perhaps just a little sip. I'm not really used to alcohol.'

'Alcohol?' Now Gordimo looked offended. 'This stuff isn't alcoholic. It's what you'd call medicinal – an old family recipe.' He poured a generous amount into Boy's mug and then added a modest splash to his own. 'Let's have a toast, why don't we? To your upcoming success.'

'Well, I don't want to get ahead of myself,' said Boy. 'They might hate my idea.'

'Hmm. What a shame we don't know what it is. We'd be happy to offer our opinion, wouldn't we Kaleb?'

'We'd be delighted.' Kaleb lifted a rasher to his mouth and took a huge bite.

'Yes, but like I said, I can't . . .'

'Sounds to me like it can't fail,' continued Gordimo. 'You said yourself, it's something that will change the world for the better.'

Yes, I . . . suppose I did.'

'Right then. Kaleb, charge up your own coffee! Now, what shall we drink to? Oh yes . . .' Gordimo lifted his mug. 'To science!' he said. He and Kaleb drained their coffees. They sat there, looking at Boy expectantly.

He raised his own mug, with rather less enthusiasm.

'Cheers,' he said and drank.



Chapter Two

THE MIRACLE

DARKNESS WAS falling fast and Boy was already on his third cup of coffee. For some reason, he didn't feel as secretive as he had before. His belly was full of meat and with each mouthful of coffee he gulped down, he felt more and more content with the world. Its rough edges seemed to blur into an agreeable softness. 'So,' he said, waving his mug at his two companions and inadvertently slopping some of the contents onto his tunic. 'Ask yourself this question, my friends. When you look around . . .' He gestured at the sand dunes on every side of them. '. . . what's the most important thing that a person might need?'