

The
QUEST
for the
GOLDEN
GATE

Kristin Lim





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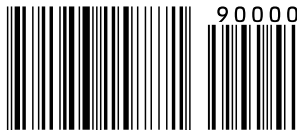
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Summary:

Reece's life changes forever when a cloaked messenger invites him to
join the Quest which takes place in a strange world filled with danger,
magic, and help from unexpected sources.

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This book is dedicated to:

Megan, who was the very first to explore the Quest;

Matthew, who will soon be old enough to join this
adventure; and

Mike, who always believed in the beauty of this
journey.



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Chapter One

AN UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP

The forest teemed with bird calls while a nearby river babbled soothingly.

Reece stood on the branch of one of his favorite trees, listening to the sounds that had become such a big part of his daily life. A breeze ruffled his dark brown hair. From where he stood, he could clearly see how the setting sun covered the treetops with a splash of multi-colored rays.

Being able to scale a tree that high was one of the few things he prided himself on. He was quite adept at climbing for someone his age. He guessed he was about nine or ten years old by comparing his height with the other boys in town, but he couldn't be sure.

Reece filled his pockets with *yami* from that tree.



They were sweet, juicy fruits similar to mangoes. He had figured out that the yummiest ones only ripened during the vibrant hours of sunset. He collected enough to last a day, then climbed down. He jumped when the ground was just a few feet away and landed quietly on his feet.

An old man suddenly wandered into the forest.

Reece quickly hid behind the tree as he observed the unexpected stranger. He was glad the color of his clothes blended well with the surrounding foliage. *No one usually comes to this part of the woods. Is he lost?* he wondered.

The old man had thinning gray hair, and walked with a slight limp. His shirt and pants were smudged with dirt. He wrung his hands as he looked up at the fading colors of the sunset. It was going to be dark soon. He started mumbling to himself, "Rickety roosters! Serves me right for coming here alone. Now I'm hopelessly lost... What should I do if a bear finds me? I can't outrun a hungry beast."

He looks scared, Reece observed. He continued watching the stranger, noting that

he didn't seem to carry any weapons. Nor did he seem dangerous. In fact, the old man looked more terrified with every passing minute.

Reece stepped out of his hiding place and greeted, "Hello."

The old man gasped, clutching his chest. "Catty caterpillars!" When he saw Reece, he sighed in relief. "You scared me! What are you doing here so deep in the woods?"

"I live here," Reece said.

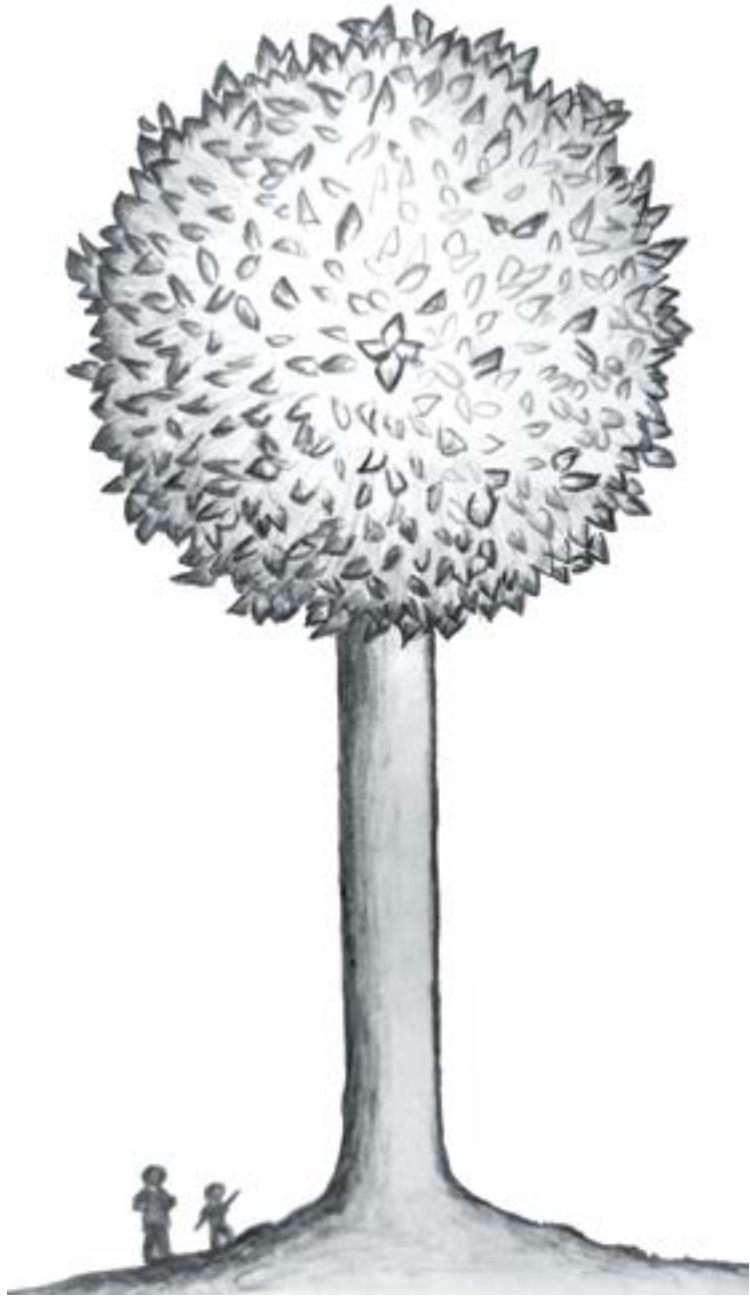
The old man raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "You can't be serious!"

"It's true. Do you want to see where I live? It's just nearby."

A few meters away grew a big old *lollee*, a tree that towered over all the others in the forest. Its leaves were very thick and formed a perfect circle at the top, which made it appear like a lollipop.

As far as Reece knew, only a handful of adults could climb a lollee because of its smooth, slippery trunk and great height. So when he found one, he took up the challenge with a bit of ingenuity. He had carved notches on its trunk, adding more and





more as he climbed, so he could gain a foothold and reach the top. He had been thrilled to discover an opening among the lush leaves. A cozy, hollow space was hidden inside, intertwined by incredibly wide and sturdy branches. He found one that he could sleep on comfortably and had claimed that as his bed. Many small animals, mostly birds, also lived there; it felt like a mini-city, just not a human one.

Reece was secretly eager to impress the old man. It was no fun trying to impress the forest creatures; most of them could climb better and faster than him by far. He placed his foot on one of the notches and started climbing the massive tree.

“Get down here before you fall...” The old man’s voice trailed off as Reece climbed up. In almost no time at all, the young boy reached dizzying heights while the old man looked on from below.

Reece waved when he safely reached the top. Then he nimbly climbed back down with a triumphant grin. The old man’s wide-eyed astonishment was the reaction he had been hoping



for. "I know it's called a lollee but I call this my Giving Tree," Reece said, leaping to the grassy ground when it was near.

The old man shook his head in disbelief. "Where's your family?"

Reece's face fell. It was a while before he answered. "I'm not sure. I'm an orphan," he mumbled, looking down.

"Who takes care of you then?"

Reece looked back up, his chest puffing with pride. "I take care of myself. I pick fruits like this." He took out a *yami* from his pocket and offered it to him. "Two of these are enough to make a person full."

The old man took hold of the gift. Its color was a beautiful yellow; its sweet fragrance hinted of ripeness. "I can tell you're an expert at picking the perfect fruit." A leather pouch dangled from his belt, and he carefully placed it inside. He asked, "What do you do when you get sick?"

"Oh, I know which plants are good for medicine! I've been observing the animals and I noticed that when they get sick, they know which

ones to eat!" Reece began pointing to nearby plants, telling the old man which ones healed what kind of sicknesses.

"Buzzin' blizzards! You're like me!" the old man exclaimed in delight. "I'm Garreth, but people often call me the Gardener. Pleased to meet you. What's your name?" He offered Reece his hand.

Reece shook it and noticed that he and the old man both had many callouses as well as dirt under their fingernails. He grinned and said, "I'm Reece. I like your name, but why are you called the Gardener?"

"I'm actually more than a gardener. I'm what you call a plant expert. But I like it when people call me Garreth the Gardener because they both start with the same letter. How about you? Shall I give you a nickname like mine? Maybe you can be... Reece the Rabbit?" Garreth playfully winked at him.

Reece giggled.

The old man snapped his fingers. "Ah, I know! You can be Reece the Ranger of the Woods."

Reece grinned and nodded his approval. "What



brings you here?”

Garreth walked to a nearby tree stump and groaned as he sat on it. He sighed wistfully. “You know, Ranger, I came here because I’m looking for new plants to study—ones that I hope can heal the sick and make the world better.” He opened his pouch for Reece to see.

Reece peeked inside and recognized most of the plants in it.

The old man continued, “But clearly, I’m too old to be exploring the woods!” He looked at Reece and his eyes suddenly brightened. “You and I seem to share a love for plants. Perhaps...”

“Perhaps what?”

“Perhaps you’d like to work with me? You can stay in my house. It’s quite small. I never needed much because I live alone, but that can change. It can also be your home. That is, if you don’t mind leaving your Giving Tree.”

“I would love to!” Reece didn’t hesitate. For many nights, he had gazed up the stars, wishing he had a real home. So when Garreth offered him shelter and companionship, he knew it was the

answer to one of his deepest longings.

That was how a young boy and an old man found each other.



Chapter Two

A NEW BEGINNING

Garreth's house looked just like him—old and unkempt. It was a simple one-story wooden house that was dusty and in need of a new coat of paint. It had a simple kitchen, a small table and two mismatched chairs, and a cot. Instead of being neatly placed on shelves, books just laid on top of each other in piles that reached all the way from the dusty floor to the ceiling. But Reece didn't mind one bit.

The breeze freely blew in and out of the many windows in the house which gave wonderful views of the enormous garden outside. Reece chose a spot near one of them and made an improvised hammock.

While Garreth's house was small, his garden

was the exact opposite. It was expansive and lush with different kinds of vegetables, herbs, and fruit trees that he had planted so he could study them and use them for medicine. Reece soon felt at home in this lovely place.

The boy liked the Gardener—they learned a lot from each other and they were similar in many ways. Just like him, Garreth talked to plants. “Plants need love, just like people,” the old man would say with a wink.

On one of their quiet evenings, Reece was lying on his hammock, looking out the window, when he asked, “How do plants know it’s time to grow? Time to bloom? Who could have designed them so perfectly?”

Garreth sat at the table; an oil lamp was beside him as he wrote in his notebook. He mumbled a reply and shrugged.

Reece continued, “Do you think someone very powerful created the first plants? The animals? The whole world?” Secretly, he also wondered, *Who could have created people? Created me? If everything in nature has a purpose, is it the same*

with me, too?

As an orphan, he always felt lost and unwanted. Deep in his heart, he ached to belong to a family who loved him. He wanted to matter. His friendship with Garreth helped fill some of that yearning, but there was still a part of him that longed for something more.

Garreth looked up from his notebook and scratched his head with the back of his pencil. “Ranger, for a young boy, you sure ask a lot of difficult questions. I honestly never wondered about those things. I’m just as clueless as you are, perhaps even more.”

Reece’s face fell.

Garreth rubbed his chin, wishing he could do more for his young friend. Then his eyes suddenly brightened. “But the Quest Maker might know! He is said to be very wise and kind.”

“Who’s he? Where can I find him?” Reece asked eagerly.

“I don’t know. But I heard some have met him. Through the Quest.”

“The Quest?”



Garreth smiled and his eyes took on a faraway look. “Yes, I joined it when I was seven years young. It was a most wondrous yet terrible experience.” He looked away in shame. “I never got to finish it. When the Quest invitation came again, I did not join. I was too afraid to fail a second time.” Then he looked at Reece with hope. “But you’re tougher than me! Someday it will come to you. The dream that isn’t a dream! It comes to everyone!”

Reece was so excited he almost fell from his hammock. “I want to go! How do I join?”

“Everybody gets an invitation but no one knows when. All you can do is wait.” A slow grin filled Garreth’s face. “You know, I also heard that whoever finishes the Quest gets a prize.”

Reece’s eyes widened. He had never won anything before. “What kind of prize?”

“I have no idea. You’ll have to win it to find out.” Garreth playfully winked at him.

After that conversation, Reece waited for the Quest invitation, growing increasingly curious and excited.

Then, on a night that otherwise seemed like all

other nights, something awoke him. He sat up, rubbed his sleepy eyes, and looked around the room. Something was different. Peculiar.

Wait. Reece’s eyes fastened to the open window. A leaf had flown in with a gentle breeze, but instead of fluttering to the ground, it stayed still in the air, suspended in midflight.

Goosebumps formed on his arms when he realized everything had stopped moving as if frozen in time. Everything except for him. He slid off the hammock and looked out the window. Even the outside was still and quiet. No cricket sounds. No croaking frogs. No rustling leaves. Nothing.

Then he heard it behind him—the sound of wind chimes. It was followed by the creak of a door opening. He turned around and gasped.

In the middle of the room, an open door appeared. It was just a simple white wooden one, but behind it was a group of swirling stars; its brightness out of place in the dark room.

A man wearing a hooded, silver cloak sauntered through. Some of his light blond hair peeked out

from underneath. He wore clothes that Reece had never seen before. They were made of cloth that shone like metal—like a special kind of armor. He was sporting a silver belt; a sheathed sword suspended from it. But even though he was carrying a weapon, Reece didn't feel afraid.

“Greetings Reece,” the man said to him, smiling. “My name is Ben. I'm a *benaihbren*—a thought traveler who serves the Quest Maker. I'm here to invite you to join the Quest for the Golden Gate.”

“A thought traveler?” Reece had never heard that term before.

Ben paused a moment before he answered, “As a *benaihbren*, I simply think of any location where we might need to go, and we're there in the blink of an eye. All it takes is a thought. The Quest takes place in a world that is very far away, and my task is to bring you there safely.”

Reece could hardly believe it. *This is it!* He could feel butterflies in his stomach. He quickly grabbed his shoes and put them on. He certainly didn't want to go on the Quest barefoot. As he got ready, he glanced at Garreth sleeping across the room.

“Should I leave my friend a note? How long will I be gone?”

Ben smiled. “Don't worry. Where we are going, time doesn't exist the way it does here. When you return, you'll wake up back to this same moment.”

Reece was relieved.

“So, young man, are you ready to join the Quest?” Ben asked. “If so, just take my hand.”

Reece gripped it excitedly, and together they stepped through the Quest Door.



Chapter Three

THE WORLD BEYOND

THE DOOR

Reece looked around in surprise. Ben was no longer with him, nor was the mysterious Quest Door. *Did we arrive already? Lollee's roots! It must have taken only a second!* he thought, amazed.

He found himself inside an enormous cavern. Lighted torches attached to the walls made it bright enough for him to see that there were already many explorers present. Reece observed with astonishment that while some looked older than the others, none were old enough to be a grown-up.

Deep within the huge rocky place were numerous small caves filled with assorted weapons and mounds of treasures. Two boys were whispering loudly to each other. "We're supposed



to enter the caves and take as many items as we want,” the one with curly hair said.

“Who told you that?” the other boy asked.

The curly-haired one shrugged. “I just heard the others talking. They seem to know what they’re doing.”

“Let’s go then!” The two boys entered a random cave. Reece quietly followed them to learn as much as he could.

A few explorers were already inside. The sounds of their conversations filled the cave with excited buzzes. Reece was surprised to see a group of girls wearing fancy looking gowns gathered together in one corner. They were talking and giggling loud enough for all to hear.

“The Golden Gate is supposedly found high above the clouds,” the girl with long black hair said, as she picked up necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. She stuffed them inside her already bulging silk pouch.

“The clouds? How do we reach that?” her friend asked.

The girl scrunched up her face and furrowed

her brow. “My sister said there might be clues throughout the journey, but so far, nobody has ever found one.”

Their other friend, who was shoving gold bangles up her arm, said, “We’ll just have to keep our eyes open then! I heard that whoever finishes the Quest will get a prize so amazing that these jewelries will seem like nothing!” The three squealed excitedly.

A group of boys overheard them. The tallest one rolled his eyes as he grabbed a bow and a quiver of arrows. He whispered to his companions, “Look at those silly girls! Don’t they know they need weapons too?”

“Maybe they think the Quest is like a party,” another boy added with a snicker. “They won’t last long!” He picked up a short sword, inspecting the golden handle which was encrusted with tiny gems. He shoved it into its scabbard with a satisfied grin.

Not long after, the sounds of conversations faded into silence as the explorers finished up and hurried out. Pretty soon, there was no one left in



the cavern.

Except, that is, for Reece.

He stood beside a pile of weapons, feeling unsure. He lifted a long sword and gave it a test swing, but it felt heavy and awkward. What if he ended up injuring himself instead of defending himself? He put it back, growing frustrated.

He picked up a gem or two from another pile, rubbing his fingers over them and considered their value. He became excited at the possibility of bringing home such treasures. *I'd only need a couple of these to fix up Garreth's house! Or maybe even buy a new one!* But just as he was about to stuff them in his pockets, another thought followed, *Can I even keep them?*

In that moment, it occurred to him that none of the explorers truly knew how to finish the Quest, let alone how to begin. Nor did they mention knowing anyone who had done so. They were either guessing or following rumors.

“What’s the Quest about anyway?” he asked out loud, not realizing he was asking the most important question of all to a completely empty

cavern. He wondered to himself, *Is it like a treasure hunt? A battle? Or maybe a contest?*

Reece tossed the gems back to the treasure pile. *I wish I could find someone who has answers.* Feeling defeated, he left that cave, passing by all the other ones until he found the rocky opening of the huge cavern. He exited and breathed in the fresh air, relieved to be outside. As he felt the sun’s rays warm his skin, he looked up with a smile. His eyes widened.

There were three suns shining in a vast sky that was purple.

Sweet yamis! I'm truly in another world! He glanced around, hoping to find something that didn’t feel strange and foreign.

A tree grew just outside the cavern entrance. Its leaves resembled feathers—dark brown at the tips before fading into lighter hues. The multiple lines that ran across the trunk made it appear old. *That tree reminds me of someone.* Reece grinned as Garreth’s face came to mind. He walked over and patted the trunk which grew in a twisting, graceful motion. He was glad to be touching

something familiar. He looked up to admire its canopy of leaves.

And that's when he saw *it*.

Chapter Four THE GIFTS

An elderly owl perched on a twisty branch. It was almost out of sight because its feathers blended with the leaves. At first glance, it looked just like the other owls Reece was familiar with. But unknown to him, it was a *jelory*, a very rare breed that could live hundreds of years. What's more, these birds were known to possess extraordinary wisdom, surpassing even the wisest man in any galaxy.

As Reece peered longer at the feathered creature, he was shocked to see this one was actually reading a book. *That must be a very special owl! I wonder if it can understand me.*

"Hello there," he greeted hesitantly, looking up into the tree.



The owl stopped reading and peered down at him with a smile. “Hoooo hoooo are you?”

Whew! He’s smart and friendly! Reece continued with more confidence, “I’m happy to meet you, Mister Owl. I’m Reece. It’s my first time here, and I have no idea what I’m doing. Can you...perhaps... teach me how to find the Golden Gate?”

The owl beamed at him but did not say anything. He tilted his head and seemed to study Reece, making him feel nervous. *I hope he won’t refuse to help me.*

Finally, the feathered creature set his book aside. “The only one who seeks wisdom is yooooou. Thus, helping you is what I’ll dooooo.” He gave a slight bow. “I am Enoch KrooKroo.” He flapped his great wings and glided down, carrying the book he had been reading in his sharp talons and offering it to Reece. “This gift I shall give to yooooou. This was written by the Quest Maker who lives in the eternal kingdom. His words are powerful and truuuuue.”

The Quest Maker? Reece remembered what Garreth had said, that he was supposedly wise and



and kind. *I hope he's right!* He gratefully accepted the book and stroked its cover. Its title was handwritten: *The Book of Promises*.

"I have a second gift for yooooou." Enoch flew toward the base of the tree and glided to a stop. Tall weeds bunched around the gnarled roots, so he parted them with a wing to reveal a hollow space that had been carved out inside the trunk.

Reece knelt down and peered inside. He saw a strange-looking egg snuggled in a nest of dry grass. Its golden-red colors reminded him of the rising sun.

Enoch hooted. "When will it hatch? I do not know. But even so, this egg must be with you wherever yooooou go."

Reece tenderly lifted it, wondering what was inside its vibrant shell. Enoch seemed to know what he was thinking for he said, "What creature is within, I have no clue. But when it hatches, it will be connected to yooooou."

"What do I need to feed it?"

Enoch shook his brown feathered head. "It will not need food or water, for it will gather its

strength from the words in the book. It shall be the same with you toooo."

"You mean I don't need to eat or drink anything on the Quest? And I'll be fine?" Reece's brows lifted in surprise.

"Yooooou are on a special kind of quest, yes yooooou are. It is the strength of your spirit that will bring yooooou far. Hoooo!" Enoch flapped his wings and flew back to his branch. He peered down at Reece. "Yooooou now have everything you need to finish your quest. This, I promise, is truuuuue."

Reece glanced down at his gifts. He wondered how a book and an egg could aid him on this strange journey. He looked up to ask the owl more questions, but Enoch's eyes were already closed. He was breathing deeply and making *hoo* snores. Tired from all the flying, he had fallen fast asleep.

Reece giggled. *Maybe Enoch needs lots of naps, just like Garreth.* He slowly backed away from the tree, trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to disturb the resting bird.

Once he was some distance away, he got ready

for his journey by carefully tucking the book in his pants' pocket; it was small enough to fit securely inside. The mysterious egg was not quite as small; he had to cradle it in his arms.

Reece faced the rocky road that was just beyond, feeling hopeful yet also nervous.

It was time to begin.

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Kristin Lim, from the sunny city of Cebu, Philippines, has been writing stories and exploring countless adventures with the tip of her pencil since she was 7 years old. Today, she's already a mom with a degree in Mass Communication. Yet deep in her heart, she's still that same little girl who loves stories about God, family, and friendship.

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