

KAI

Under the heart of Rivven was a cave. Hardly anyone in the city knew it existed, and even fewer knew how to find it, and yet it was huge – a cavern so vast that you could hardly see from one end to the other. Soft glowing lamps hung from its roof like tiny suns, shining down on a world that was a home, a training ground, a school, and a place of secrets.

It was the Dragonseer Guild Hall ... and

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Kai and Boneshadow

today it was a racecourse.

“Come on, Boneshadow!” called Kai as they hurtled around the track. “You’re doing great!”

He glanced back as they reached the second bend. Behind him was Erin, then Tom and Connor almost neck and neck, then the others. Kai was leading, but

they were only halfway round.

“How are you feeling?” he called down.

Beneath him, Boneshadow laughed. “Wonderful!” she cried.

Kai tucked his head down and grinned. He was in a saddle and his feet were secure in stirrups, but it wasn’t a horse he was riding. This creature’s skin was smooth and dry, and as white as bone. She had a long neck, and a large head, and on her chest was a red flare, and Kai sat tucked between two folded wings.

She was Boneshadow, and she was a *dragon*.

“Rockhammer’s close behind us!” Kai called. Behind him, Erin’s dragon,



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Rockhammer, was huge and fierce looking, with great spikes, and the ground shuddered with every stride. Erin's face had a look of grim determination.

"He'll get tired," called back Boneshadow. "Hold on!"

They raced around the curve. Kai could feel Boneshadow's powerful muscles move, and could sense her thoughts, too – the beat of her heart, the joy of running, the feeling that she could keep going forever. He could feel all this because, like the other children, he was a *dragonseer*. Boneshadow was his dragon, and he was her human.

They straightened out, and Boneshadow stretched her legs. The air whistled through

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Kai's short black hair and made his brown eyes water, and he blinked and laughed. The ground shuddered, and he realised that Rockhammer was catching up with them. The big dragon was faster on the straight, where his long legs could eat up the distance. Ahead of them was the next fence. Boneshadow adjusted her pace.

"Ready?" she growled. Kai held on tight, and the dragon bunched her hind legs and *leapt* over the fence, landing with hardly a jolt. On her back, the white leathery wings stayed folded – like many dragons, Boneshadow could fly, but this was a running race only. Kai felt the *thump* behind him as Rockhammer leapt and cleared the fence

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too. He could hear Erin bellowing and knew they were right behind – but already the next bend was coming up, and Boneshadow, more nimble, leaned tight into the curve and pulled away again.

Rockhammer caught them on the third straight, coming up to the last corner. He was tired, Kai could tell, and his big pink tongue flopped around in his mouth like a dog's. Twenty metres to go, and Boneshadow was just ahead. If they could make the corner, Kai knew she had the energy for the final sprint!

Erin shouted something into Rockhammer's ear and the big dragon nodded. He started to drift sideways, into

Kai and Boneshadow

Boneshadow's line. Kai glanced at him in alarm.

“Hey!” he yelped.

Ten metres to the bend and the big dragon was very close, almost brushing against them. Five metres...

“Whoa!” called Kai suddenly, and dragged on the reins. Boneshadow eased up immediately, and with a whoop Erin and Rockhammer took the racing line and pulled ahead around the corner. Now they were in the lead, and Boneshadow had lost her pace; she accelerated as they came into the final straight, and almost caught up, but Rockhammer stretched out his long neck and crossed the finish line first.

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“YASSSSSS!” shouted Erin. Rockhammer gave a huge bellow.

Behind them, Kai and Boneshadow eased to a halt. Kai slid down from the dragon’s back and patted her.

“Sorry, Bone,” he said with a rueful smile. “If we’d gone for the turn, we would have collided with Rockhammer.”

Boneshadow shook her large white head. “We were ahead of them,” she said softly. “They should have given way for us.”

“I know,” said Kai. “But I didn’t want to take the risk. Anyway, the race was fun even if we didn’t win, right?”

Boneshadow chuckled and rested her head against Kai’s shoulder. “Of course,” she said.

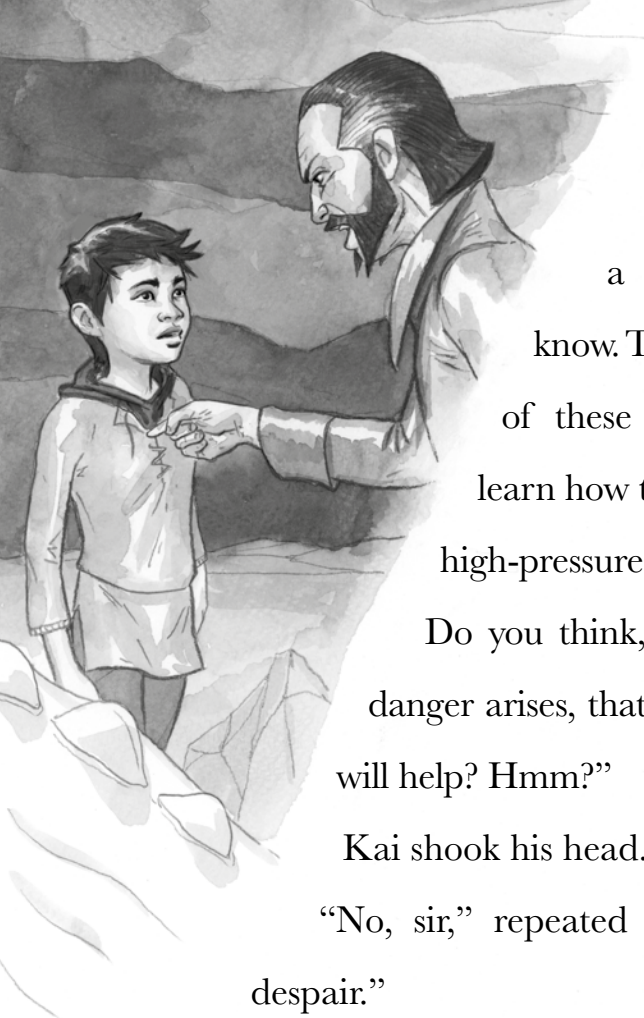
“But I’m not sure Vice Chancellor Creedy agrees...”

Kai looked up. Striding towards them were two of the senior Guild members. Vice Chancellor Creedy was dressed all in grey and his face was drawn into a dour scowl. Beside him was Daisy, who taught self-defence. She walked with a bouncing happy stride, in bright-yellow leggings that seemed to glow in comparison to Creedy’s dull robes.

“Boy!” snapped Creedy, pointing at Kai. “What was that?”

Kai blinked. “Um... Well, sir, I didn’t want—”

“You pulled up,” said Creedy. “You had the racing line and you pulled up!” He scowled.



Kai and Boneshadow

“This isn’t a *game*, you know. The purpose of these races is to learn how to deal with high-pressure situations. Do you think, when real danger arises, that being *nice* will help? Hmm?”

Kai shook his head. “No, sir.”

“No, sir,” repeated Creedy. “I despair.”

Beside him, Daisy grinned. “Oh, it wasn’t so bad. That was some good racing, Kai! And, Boneshadow, you took those corners well.” She nodded her head towards Creedy and

gave a tiny wink, making Kai grin. Creedy sighed.

“Och, away,” he said irritably, waving a hand. “That’s enough for today. Put away your harnesses – *tidily* now!”

Kai and Boneshadow headed back to the training ground. Ahead of them, Erin was doing a victory dance and Rockhammer was walking in a great swagger, his huge mouth open and grinning.

“It *was* a good race,” said Boneshadow as they headed back.

“Yeah,” said Kai.

Would have been good to win though, he thought.