

Excerpt from The Rider Reclaimed

Kearin wanted to escape. Disappear. It was the awards ceremony. The war games were over. Yet, he wasn't the one standing on the podium. The sand beneath his feet felt like it was sinking, his humiliation dragging him under. The Duke's son, top of his class. *In last place.*

The presenter announced the ceremony's closing. They should've won. The first battle of the year, his chance to prove himself. Pushing through the crowd, Kearin tried to put as much distance between himself and the placings as he could. He tried to walk with the confidence his father had, ignoring the snickers and laughs from the other riders. Curling his hands into fists, Kearin dug his fingernails into his skin. The hushed whispers surrounded him as he struggled to hold his head up.

Kearin spotted his team near the training section of the arena, a small group huddled at the back of the crowd.

He approached, noticing the anxious glances passed between his teammates. "How is she?" he asked.

Esuri sat up against the belly of her dragon, blood staining her clothing. His right-wing, Ryven, was kneeling by her side, trying to staunch the bleeding. Two soiled bandages lay on the ground, discarded in an effort to soak up the blood.

Ryven must've read the worry in his eyes. "The wound is deep, but it didn't go through."

A long gash ran below her collarbone. It was a recognizable cut. The kind caused by a glaive, and he knew exactly who it belonged to.

Spinning around, Kearin fixed his gaze on the culprit. Mora was attempting to stop Tuoko. The dragon's snout was stuck in her bag, on the hunt for the treats she had snuck in there.

The tug of war between them had become a part of their daily routine. It was a battle to saddle him, a battle to wear a bit, a battle to get him to listen.

This was all her fault. He stormed up to her, growling, “What the hell happened out there?”

Mora jumped at his voice, rushing to answer. “I don’t know. He’s never done that before—”

“Stop.” He hissed. *She broke the formation. She failed to block the oncoming attack.* “No. More. Excuses. It happened because you didn’t have your grip under control. Because of you, Esuri got hurt.”

Mora abandoned her attempt to stop Tuoko, choosing to glare at Kearin. “I’ve been trying to train him. A *leader* would know better and guide his team. I can’t get better if you refuse to help me.”

“And I can’t teach if you’re not there,” he snarled, jabbing a finger at her. “If you hadn’t been slacking off during training, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Mora crossed her arms. “Maybe if you did your job—”

“I’m good at my job!” Kearin roared. “I worked hard for this! You want training? Fine. Stay here. For once in your life, pick up your weapon and swing it. And after that, if you think you’re anywhere close to being *good enough*, keep swinging.”

Horror washed over Kearin as he looked around. A crowd had formed. They circled around him, a cage with no doors. The entire academy watched, a good leader is supposed to stay calm and collected. In control. The walls he fought to build crumbled under their relentless staring.

Mora shuffled backwards, her usual bravado stripped away.

Shadows danced across the field, followed by the harsh sound of flapping wings. Kearin looked up. There were seven dragons flying in a perfect “v” formation.

Soaring down into the arena, the council landed one by one. Kearin’s shoulders went rigid, pulled back with his arms firm at his side. It was the stance of a soldier, the mask of a fraud.

They dismounted and he was met with the face of his father, Duke Giyaus, who walked with both hands behind his back, and chin held high.

Kearin rushed to greet him. A report, he needed a report. A good leader gave a battle analysis after every mission. He had spent hours rehearsing his victory speech, hoping for once that his father would be proud of him.

Kearin opened his mouth, shocked when no words came out. He hadn’t practiced for their defeat. The squad leader cleared his throat.

“Father, I mean Duke Giyaus. I am sorry to report the results of the war games...” His father walked past him, words falling on deaf ears.

“Report.” Kearin’s heart sank. The order was directed at Ryven.

He never felt more humiliated as Ryven rattled off an explanation as if he had done it a thousand times before. It was concise, the rider confident with all his answers, even earning a slight nod from the Duke.

The other squad leaders focused on Kearin, sneering at him. He only stared at his father’s back. *I can do the same thing. You just have to look at me.*

Ryven was the only one that mattered. His father was *talking*, paying attention to his best friend's every word. It didn't stop there; the Duke's voice carried across the arena, giving out commands to the other squads. Commands Kearin should've been giving.

His father had turned, but he faced the other council members, looking right over Kearin's head. His next words were the ones his son prayed never to hear.

"How disappointing."

Kearin paced around his room. He couldn't focus, rubbing his finger against his temples. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Even with the door shut, he couldn't stop their stares from flashing in his mind. He was trapped. Every muscle in his body tightened; he couldn't stop digging his nails into his skin.

He wanted to fly; flying cleared his head. When he turned to his window, a flash of lightning cracked across the sky.

He remembered the last rider who tried to fly during a storm. Seeing through the storm had been near impossible, and the rider and his dragon crashed into the cliffs, falling into the ravine.

Kearin felt his skin crawl as the rain pounded against the glass. He couldn't escape. With a frustrated scream, he swung.

His fist collided with the window, smashing the glass just as the thunder roared from outside. Pulling away from the broken window, he winced, looking down at his hand. Cuts

littered his knuckles, as blood dripped down his fingers. Spikes of throbbing pain traveled down his wrist, digging into his forearm.

A knock on the door tore Kearin from his thoughts. Dread washed over him as he pictured his father standing on the other side.

Grasping the doorknob with shaking hands, he opened the door. It was Ryven and Esuri. Kearin's jaw clenched.

Ryven went to speak but stopped, eyeing the leader's hand. "What did you do?"

Shaking his head, Kearin said nothing. He could still see it, Ryven stealing his title away.

Rolling his eyes, the medic dug into the bag at his hip before holding a roll of bandages out to Kearin. "Here. This should help. Don't forget to change them every couple hours."

He didn't need his friend's pity. Ryven pretended like nothing had happened, talking to Kearin like usual, like he hadn't embarrassed him in front of everyone.

His friend waved the roll in front of him, waiting for him to take them.

Kearin glared, snatching the bandages from Ryven's hand and shoving them into his pocket. He refused to use them, but he knew he could never outlast the medic's stubbornness.

When he looked back up, Ryven was raising an eyebrow at him. He ignored it, crossing his arms.

Ryven's voice came out more of a command than a question. "What are you going to do about Mora?"

Kearin let out a harsh breath. "What about her?" he grumbled.

"We can't find her. She's not in her room."

Why should he care? Ryven could deal with her.

Esuri stepped forward, a realization dawning on her face. “We never saw her leave.”

Kearin shook his head; he didn’t understand. *Mora was stubborn, but...* His eyes widened in alarm. *No. She wouldn’t.* Shoving Ryven out of the way, Kearin raced down the hallway, his heart pounding.

Thunder rumbled beyond the walls of the corridor. He ran faster. Sprinting outside, Kearin forced his way into the storm, reciting a prayer in his head. *Mora, please don’t be there.*

A flash of lightning illuminated the field. Kearin first spotted the purple dragon curled against the wall before he noticed Mora, clothes sopping wet.

The relentless storm did nothing to stop her as the wooden training dummy creaked under her swings. Kearin watched as her shivering body labored with each repetition.

The realization haunted Kearin. She had been here all day, because of the order he had given her.

“Kearin, stop this,” Ryven demanded. The other squad members had raced after him, witnesses to what Kerin’s leadership measured up to.

Mora’s scream pierced through the storm, a shriek of pain and grief from her soul, anguish so profound it took his breath away. His heart stopped as her knees buckled, her body crumpling into the wet sand.

“Stop her!” Ryven shouted at him. “She’s going to kill herself!”

Kearin could hear the sound of metal scraping against the dirt. He couldn’t believe it. She was standing up. Every obstacle, every insult he threw at her face, Mora took the hits and got back up.

The glaive acted as her crutch, wedged into the ground as she lifted herself up. With shivering arms, she raised the glaive once more.

Ryven shoved him. “Why don’t you put your father’s ego aside and fix this?” Kearin didn’t need to be told twice.

Squinting against the downpour, he stepped towards Mora as the thudding sound of metal on wood echoed through the grounds. His approach was slow, hoping she would hear his pleas.

“Stop.”

The glaive remained clutched to her, Mora refusing to let go of her grip. Another swing. She cried out, the vibration sending a shockwave of pain.

“Mora, stop!” he yelled, lunging for the weapon.

She reeled, “No! I can do it!”

Trying to rip her arm free from his grip, Mora stumbled, crashing to the ground. She cradled the weapon in her arms.

Crouching down, Kearin tried again, slower this time, coaxing her fingers off the polearm. They fell into her lap, bloodied palms facing up. Layers of skin were ripped open, blood trickling from the ruptured blisters.

Kearin turned to the training dummy, its chest split open, almost falling over.

Her voice cut through the storm. “I can still do it. Please—”

He swung hard. The dummy let out a loud crunch as his weapon collided. Needles of pain shot through his arms.

Kearin swung again. He failed his team. Another swing. He failed his father. Hurt *her*. His shoulders screamed as the glaive lodged itself into the wood, and with a satisfying crack, the dummy toppled over.

The rain slowed to a drizzle as Kearin stared at Mora. Her brows furrowed as tears mixed with rain. He witnessed the wave of tremors that ran through her petite frame, exhaustion tearing at her body.

Holding his hand out to her, Kearin presented the roll of white cotton Ryven tried to give him. She glanced down at the bandages and then back up at him. Moments passed, and he realized she wouldn't take them.

Kneeling, Kearin took her trembling hands in his and gently wrapped the bandages. The pressure on the wounds caused Mora to hiss, twisting her hand away. He grabbed her wrist tightly, mumbling an apology. He hoped this would be enough to show he was wrong. The words 'I'm sorry' felt like ash on his tongue; they were too weak for what he put her through.

Busying himself with wrapping her hands was easier than facing what he had done. If he looked up, he would see all the damage he caused. Another failure added to the list.

Mora broke the silence first. He wasn't ready for the broken whisper that fell from her lips.

"Am I enough?"

Kearin tied off the makeshift bandages and held her hands. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he whispered, "You always have been."