

## Supreme M 321

### Chapter 321 Final Struggle Part 2

"Indeed, but at this point of his evolution it's too early to tell." Leegaain explained.

"Most of those traits are common in reptile Guardians. He may become a dragon, a basilisk, a leviathan, or maybe something new entirely. As for her, she hasn't undergone a single tribulation. What you see is a lost soul drove mad by pain.

"Her appearance means that her grudge is so deep not even death can stop it. That woman is likely to turn into an undead if her body isn't cleanly disposed of."

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Nalear tumbled on the floor with Jirni in hot pursuit. Her blade followed Nalear's major arteries' every movement, ready to strike as soon as she was close enough. Nalear suddenly Blinked, but Jirni was expecting such a move.

She sidestepped while executing a circle slash, putting her back against the wall and hitting the space 180° around her at the same time. Yet Nalear wasn't there.

She appeared in front of a stunned Orion, hitting him squarely on the jaw with the iron gauntlet. He didn't lose consciousness, but he would be incapacitated for a few seconds. More than enough to put an end to the fight.

She Blinked again, a split second before Lith could exploit the opening at her back. He cursed his lack of true dimensional magic which made him slower than Nalear while using a healing spell on Orion, hastening his recovery.

Nalear Blinked back to Jirni, a knife dripping poison in the left hand and the sword in the right one. Normally Lith would have admired her mastery of spirit magic, which allowed Nalear to move even better than when she was unscathed.

The burden on her body had to be enormous and so the pain, yet she endured it like it was nothing. The knife was all Lith needed to set his course of action.

He interrupted the healing and prepared the next spell as fast as he could.

Nalear clashed with Jirni for a split second, disappearing again just to reappear behind Phloria's back with her knife already lunging forward. Instead of Phloria's flesh, the knife bit Lith's stone gauntlet, making sparks but no damage.

Lith had Switched with Phloria at the last second, headbutting Nalear in the nose before she could recover from the surprise and Blink again. The nose broke, filling Nalear's eyes with tears and her mouth with blood, making it difficult for her to breathe.

Lith slashed downwards while holding the Gatekeeper with both hands, aiming for her neck. She used her own blade to block, reinforcing her weakened arms with spirit magic. Lith followed suit.

The Gatekeeper was already infused with great elemental energies and now was boosted by Lith's enhanced body, fusion, and spirit magic, while Nalear's sword was at its weakest.

The blade shattered on impact, still exerting enough resistance to deflect the hit but not enough to prevent Lith to adjust the trajectory and cut Nalear's left arm. Before the glove could reach the ground and emit a metallic clang, Lith spun on himself to exploit his own momentum.

The Gatekeeper rose and fell again, this time chopping Nalear diagonally from the right shoulder to the left hip. Lith had the sword reduce its size, short enough to decapitate her and stab her heart in a single fluid motion.

The energies coursing through the blade consumed the corpse like fire burning dried grass until nothing remained.

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"Does that qualify as 'clean disposal'?" Milea asked.

"It surely does." Tyris nodded.

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Nalear's death marked the end of the hostilities inside the White Griffon. Once the master ring lost her imprint, it turned to dust and so did all the slave items. It was one of Hatorne's safety features to leave behind no traces after the deed was done.

Lith fell on his knees. The rushed Switch and the use of spirit magic to overcome his limits had drained him of any strength. Phloria helped him to get up. His legs were too shaky to sustain Lith anymore.

The gauntlet disappeared. With Nalear's death, the bond was back to its usual strength. Solus went back being a ring, her core reverting to yellow just as Lith's turned from bright cyan to just cyan.

As he gasped for air, feeling his arms as heavy as lead, his mind was once again assaulted by the vision. This time the images didn't fade away. Every single one of them shattered like broken glass.

The academy burning, Phloria's death as well as Lith's family's slaughter. Everything crumbled, replaced by a blank slate. Lith and Solus instinctively knew it was because the threat was over. Lith's soul was finally at rest and the future unknown as it was supposed to be.

"What you did was crazy dangerous." Phloria was still terrified.

"How did you know where she would reappear and the angle of the strike? One mistake and she would have stabbed you instead."

"The vision." Lith replied. "I replayed in my mind the part where you got stabbed so many times I could follow her blade with my eyes closed."

It was far from a romantic phrase, yet Phloria felt her heart flutter.

"Where are the others?" Lith asked.

"They are safe." Phloria chose her words carefully, trying to hide the pain gripping her voice the best that she could. Her heart sank as soon as the adrenaline from the battle started to fade away.

Phloria was ridden by guilt for her choice of putting her mother above her friend's life. Lith didn't miss her distress. The cheeks that were just turning red were now pale.

"What happened?" He asked. Orion could see his daughter struggling to find the words and stepped forward to take the burden off her shoulders.

"Don't." Jirni stopped him. "I know that it's painful, but she has to live with it. The sooner she faces reality the better. We can't protect her forever."

Orion held his wife's hand tight, nodding. He didn't like Lith one bit. Orion had read his personal file, watched all the recordings related to him and found his evaluation accurate.

Yet after all he did for Orion's little Flower during Balkor's attack, after seeing Lith in action, spitting blood to protect his family, Orion had come to respect Lith. He treated Phloria right and made her happy as Orion had never seen her before.

He couldn't ask for more, not without feeling a sadistic hypocrite.

Orion couldn't stand the thought that just after being reunited such a revelation could split them apart forever.

Phloria led Lith to a corner, making him sit before telling him the whole story. Her voice was shaky, the pain and regret palpable, yet she managed not to cry.

Lith said nothing. His mind believed her, Phloria would never pull such a cruel joke on him. His heart, however, was struck in denial.

"Can I see his body?" Lith had managed to prevent the vision from coming true, yet it felt a hollow victory to him.

"I'm sorry. I'm too weak to open a Warp Steps right now." Phloria shook her head.

"I'm so sorry. I'm always so useless." Tears started to streak from her eyes.

"No, you are not." Lith forced himself to stand up, hugging her and letting Phloria bury her head on his shoulder.

"It's all my fault." She sobbed, searching for his warmth.

"If that's true, then I'm as responsible for Yurial's death as you are. If only I cared for him a bit more, then maybe my vision would have shown us his fate too. Maybe, his father would have allowed him to stay home."

## Chapter 322 Moving Forward Part 1

"How can it be your fault?" Phloria raised her head, looking Lith in the eyes.

"You warned us multiple times. You wanted us to stay away from the academy."

"How can it be your fault?" Lith took her face between his hands, caressing her cheeks with his thumbs.

"You did all you could in an impossible situation. In your shoes, I would have done the same thing. We always give priority to those we love the most. My vision is a perfect example of it."

"I don't know about you two, but I'm dead tired. Taking down crazy Professors is way harder than I imagined." Jirni sat down, leaning her back against the wall and dragging Orion to her side.

She was happy the kids were having a moment, but she couldn't allow them to keep beating themselves up. They were clearly exhausted, both mentally and physically.

'Phloria has too much on her plate already. Yurial's death, killing humans for the first time, spectating all the horrors humans inflict on their own kind. If she doesn't rest a bit, when the nervous breakdown hits her it could be fatal.' Jirni knew her daughter well.

It wasn't a matter of 'if', the only variable was 'when'.

Phloria followed suit. There was nothing she wanted to say or hear anymore. She was so tired that words, like violence, could only cause her more pain. Phloria and Lith fell asleep almost immediately, leaning against each other while clenching their hands like they were a lifeline.

Jirni looked at them with a tender expression, before turning to Orion with her trademark "I told you so" grin.

"He snores." It was all he could think about for a snarky reply.

"And so does she. They make a fine tune nonetheless." Jirni rebuked.

"Look, I'm too tired to play this game." Orion sighed. "Why don't we follow their lead and get a little shut eye?"

"Because we are the adults and because we don't know if Nalear had associates or a back up plan. I'm not lowering my guard until we are back home."

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Tyris appeared next to Amyla Farg, bringing her back to her peak condition with a simple touch.

She woke up abruptly, a Gatekeeper longsword appeared in her hand while she looked around for the enemy.

"I hope you have learned your lesson." Tyris said with a gentle smile.

"I hope everyone will." She sighed, looking at Billow and Thorman still laying on the ground, alive but unconscious.

"What happened? How could she recover like that?" Farg was shocked. She was still a rookie in the Corpse. She never expected for natural Awakened to be so different from the artificial ones.

"Awakening it's the first step towards becoming one with Mogar. She was a much lesser version of a Guardian, but still had access to an almost endless supply of mana." Tyris's explanation was cryptic on purpose.

She wanted Farg to understand her limits without giving her any hints about the Awakening process. Tyris had learned from experience that power couldn't be gifted recklessly. It had to be earned.

"What?" Farg felt her heart skip a beat, promising herself that from that moment onwards she would always put down an unknown enemy unless ordered otherwise.

"Almost." Tyris repeated herself. "Follow me, there is still much I have to teach you before the academy starts again."

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Jirni's worries turned out to be groundless. Nothing happened for several minutes, until the academy's power core turned back online. It allowed the members of the army to cross the Warp Gate and secure the place.

Thanks to the royal override code, Jirni could temporarily turn off the arrays, making it possible for Phloria to bring Friya and Quylla back. Friya was barely able to walk, while Quylla was still out cold.

Jirni moved them all to the White Griffon hospital with a Warp Steps. For the first time in its history, the hospital was understaffed and unprepared to handle an emergency of such a scale.

There wasn't a single free spot. Its wings usually so orderly and quiet were now a chaotic mess. Manohar managed to check them up, marking Quylla as the only one in need of urgent medical attention.

After stabilizing her condition, he immediately returned to his most severe cases. Jirni had let them sleep until the whole academy was safe again, so Lith had regained a part of his strength.

'My body is still battered. Even with Invigoration, I can barely access to 60% of my full power. It's still much better than when I saved Protector. Yurial's body is inside a dimensional amulet, so there isn't much hope. If there is even a ghost of a chance, I must give it a try.

'I wish I knew how to contact Scarlett.' Lith sighed.

The Lord of the forest had saved him and Protector in the past. Her expertise with true magic was unparalleled.

Friya took out Yurial's corpse from her dimensional amulet, laying it on a bed.

Lith used Invigoration together with all the diagnostic spells he knew. Nothing worked. There was no life force, no mana core, nothing he could rejuvenate.

"He's really dead." Lith shook his head. He covered Yurial's corpse with a sheet, hiding the gaping wound that lesser healing magic had failed to treat.

The surviving members of the group hugged each other, sharing their pain. All hope was lost, the only thing left to do for them was grieving.

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The following days were hectic, at least for the Royals and the staff of the White Griffon academy. Nalear's contingency plan consisted in releasing to the public all the video recordings and documents connecting many of the most powerful noble households to Archmage Lukart.

They revealed their plans for the civil war, proving the involvement of many influential nobles in funding Hatorne's work and providing her the necessary materials to realize the improved slave items.

Everything had to be double checked, since the source of the evidence was still a traitorous mass murder. The detailed financial records and shipments tracking documents made it easy for the Royal Constables to verify the information.

The Crown was finally able to purge many of the most dangerous elements of the Court, stripping their families of a considerable portion of their authority. In any other circumstances, the nobles would have rebelled, but they were caught in a perfect storm.

The Crown suppressed their finances, the army and the Mage Association ostracized their members, while commoners and the new magical bloodlines were just expecting the nobles to give them an excuse to burn them at the stakes.

Too many had died in a single day. The blame fell on them like the ax of the executioner, crippling the noble households.

One fourth of the White Griffon students and Professors were dead or mentally scarred to the point of being barely functional. Most of the survivors among the slave items bearers were quarantined, waiting to be interrogated.

"Nalear made me do it." Was too cheap an excuse. The documents proved that while some were truly victims, others were just perpetrators caught in their own scheme.

Professor Duke Marth was promoted to the role of new Headmaster. He was perfect for the role. Not too young nor too old, well liked, brilliant in his field and also a Forgemaster.

## Chapter 323 Moving Forward Part 2

Vastor and Rudd were deemed too old for the role, plus their love for ancient magical bloodlines was well known. It made them even more undesirable than they already were, even as simple Professors.

Their ties with many of the families implicated with the scandal made their positions precarious at best.

Manohar was considered a visionary in the healing hearts, a true genius, or, to put it in less kind words, a complete nutjob. He was fickle and unreliable, not to mention his biography was full of social blunders to the point of being universally considered an etiquette book about how not to behave.

He resented the Crown judgment, but only until his first visit to Marth's new office. Just seeing how busy his schedule was and the amount of paperwork being Headmaster involved, Manohar was tempted to taking another "vacation."

The Crown had no time to waste with him, so the literally chained Manohar to the academy, just to stay safe.

Professor Wanemyre was among the mentally and physically scarred. Regrowing her arm was easy, but the memories of all Nalear had made her almost destroyed her. She was forced to take a sabbatical, receiving the best care and counseling the Griffon Kingdom could offer.

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Lith moved with his whole family to the Ernas Household again. Even Rena and her husband were forced to relocate. Lith wouldn't let his sister and niece be further than his arm's reach.

Yurial's loss wasn't devastating for him as losing Protector was. They had known each other for barely a year and their relationship had been shallow until the fourth year's second exam.

Still, Yurial was the first man Lith was almost ready to call a friend, someone he went through thick and thin together. Lith wasn't responsible in any way for his death and not being present when it happened made it easier for him to feel detached.

At least until Archmage Deirus went to visit him. Lith's first impulse was to kick the man in the groin and beat him to death. An impulse he quickly suppressed. Velan Deirus was guilty of being an uncaring father, but nothing more.

Lith knew that just like after Protector's disappearance, his first instinct was to find someone to put the blame on. The visit was very brief. Lith could control his violent impulses, but his eyes were filled with scorn and reproach.

Archmage Deirus couldn't stand those eyes. They were identical to those that pierced his soul every time he was in front of a mirror. He remained only the time necessary to give Lith a small package.

It was full of notebooks filled with Yurial's handwriting. They contained all the knowledge he had acquired about the impossible arrays, the results of his experiments, and his suggestions about how to further the research.

Deirus knew who to give them because on the first page of each of them was written in big letters: "For Lith". He had found them once he opened his son's dimensional amulet after recovering his body.

Velan had also found Yurial's diaries, discovering how painful his existence had been, how neglected he had felt. How despite having found a better family within the academy walls rather than inside his own Household, Yurial was still ready to perform his duty.

Yurial's love for his father and his people was greater than everything life had put him through. Velan Deirus cried a lot reading his son's most private thoughts, finding himself more monstrous than any of those involved in Yurial's death.

He had nurtured a future leader, a great mage, but at the same time, he had shown no care for the man destined to bear those pompous titles. Velan realized to have killed his own son multiple times over the years, always putting his own interests over Yurial's well being.

After Velan left, Lith made one of the biggest mistakes in his life. He put the notebooks inside Soluspedia, accessing at all of them at once. In between of his research notes, Yurial had also written all the things that he wanted to share with Lith.

All the thoughts they never had the time to talk about because of the academy. Reading how Yurial had always considered him like a big brother and a true friend, ripped Lith's soul to shreds. It made him understand how precious was their bond.

He had moved to the Ernas household only because he knew that to overcome the grief before the academy started again, he needed all the help his family could give him. A noble household was the safest and most comfortable place for his purpose.

Also, Phloria needed him. Lith would never leave her alone while she was facing something even worse than Carl's death. At least Carl had died by the hand of a stranger, when Lith was already a grown, bitter, cold hearted man.

Phloria was ridden by the guilt of having indirectly caused Yurial's death, of having killed mind controlled students to defend her family. Friya was in an almost identical situation. The blood on Phloria's hands was the same that was on hers.

She had mindlessly obeyed to ease her own conscience. It was because of her incompetence that saving Jirni took so long, causing Yurial's demise as well as that of many others.

She had seen Lith healing much worse wounds in much less time. During Balkor's attack, he even treated Yurial and Phloria at the same time.

'How could I bear my second place so proudly? Yurial was right, we are a fraud. I don't deserve my ranking just like I don't deserve my friends. I'm an utter failure, I should have been the one dying.' Were the thoughts haunting her.

Actually, her second place was fully deserved. Friya's talent for healing magic was on par with Lith's. She just wasn't an Awakened.

Quylla's life was still hanging on a thread. She was unable to eat, puking almost as soon as she ingested any kind of food. Someone had always to be by her side, to make sure she didn't harm herself.

She would cry until exhaustion made her faint, unable to speak a word most of the time. Potions and the sharing of life force were the only things keeping her alive. At night, she would sleep with Orion and Jirni by her side.

It was the only moment she managed to truly rest, free from fits of hysteria.

At his arrival, Lith thought nothing of them. To him, they were just Phloria's accessories, something he would worry about in his spare time. Yurial's words changed his mind.

Maybe they were nothing to him, but the opposite wasn't necessarily true. Lith had already lost an opportunity because, after the second exam, he had simply promoted his companions from strangers to fish in a tank.

He never treated them as persons, only as something to feed and watch from time to time. A living screensaver, less than pets. As much as Lith found it unbelievable, there were actually people that really cared for him outside of his family.

Yet he would never be able to recognize them if he didn't give them at least a chance before discarding them like trash.

Yurial's death showed him that life was too short to worry about outliving those who would die of old age. They were the lucky ones.

## Chapter 324 Final Rankings Part 1

The White Griffon academy didn't stay close for long, just a couple of weeks.

During that time, Lith did all he could to help the three girls recover. Despite the traumatic events their daughters had gone through, the Ernas couple had a duty to uphold. They would be rarely at home, mostly for the meals and for the night.

Sometimes one or both of them were forced to stay away for a day or more. They were the only surviving witnesses to not have any relationship with the academy's politics and also those who had put an end to Nalear's threat.

They had to write multiple reports, confer with the Royals, the Council of the Headmasters, and all the upper echelons involved in the administration of the Country. The old and new noble families wanted someone to blame.

Heads were going to roll before the storm would pass. Jirni and Orion were the keystones in many ongoing high profile trials, not only as witnesses but also as a Royal Constable and a member of the Knight's Guard respectively.



While the Queen's corps dealt with all the threats related to magic, the Knight's Guard had a defensive role inside the Griffon Kingdom. They were tasked with protecting and assisting the Royal Constables during their investigations.

It was a corps comprised only by Forgemasters and Mage Knights. Only a few, like Orion, were both, making them the cream of the crop. It has to be said that an academy wasn't the only way to learn a specialization.

The army had the means and the knowledge to train its members. Unlike an academy, the process could take far more than two years, depending on the talent and the number of missions a Guard had to take.

Also, the candidate had to prove their worth beforehand the training began. Most of the members of the Knight's Guards would start with only one specialization and learn the other over the years.

During their absence, Lith took care of the three girls to the best of his abilities and with the help of his family. Alas, there wasn't much he could do. No words could ease their suffering, no simple gesture could make their trauma fade away.

He could only stick by their side, not letting them hole up in their rooms. Only time could help. Lith was an expert on grieving and facing pain, but his methods couldn't be shared.

Lith lacked the necessary empathy to connect with Phloria or Friya. Killing the mind controlled students didn't bother him in the least. He knew only one way to deal with his enemies and wasn't interested in the reason why they attacked him.

As for Yurial's death, Lith regretted having missed the opportunity to know him better, to finally have a friend. He missed Yurial, but that was it.

'If I had to choose between mom, one of my sisters, or even Phloria and him, I would have done the same thing. I'm not a hypocrite. I'm aware that I didn't know Yurial well enough to care about him and now I never will.' Lith thought.

Solus played a big part in his recovery, always reminding him of all the affection he had been showered with.

Lith left Elina and Rena to take care of Quylla. They were the best moms he knew. In his mind, if they weren't able to give her the solace and compassion she needed, then no one could.

Phloria and Friya were easier to deal with. He made them follow the routine his own counselor gave Lith after Carl's death. Waking them up at regular hours, forcing them to eat and spend time with those they loved.

Everything to show them that pain was just a part of life. That no matter how dark their lives felt, they weren't alone.

'This stuff never worked for me, but it's worth a shot.' He thought.

The worst part for all of them was the night. Being alone in the dark, the girls couldn't stop their minds from being assaulted by bad memories, regrets, and hindsight.

Lith was always by Phloria's side, making sure that whenever she would wake up abruptly because of the nightmares, she would always find him right next to her.

When the academy started again, Quylla wasn't in the condition to move. Like many other students, she received permission to stay home and recover. She would get back to the academy the following year or whenever she was ready.

Lith, Friya, and Phloria resumed their lives, drowning themselves into work to keep their anxiety at bay. Professors were now able to cross from one floor to another. There hadn't been enough time to find replacements for the fallen ones, so Ironhelm now taught Forgemastering to both the fourth and the fifth year.

With Linjos gone, after the last tragedy, Headmaster Marth decided to go back to written and spellcasting exams inside the academy, just like in the past. The students had got enough real life experience in the last two years.

Now they needed peace and quiet. The civil war was no longer an issue, the traitor was gone, and when the anniversary came, Balkor didn't send any note. No one could believe to such luck, so they all made their children go back home and went into hiding for the following three days.

Balkor didn't send a single undead, giving the Griffon Kingdom the first piece of good news after so much suffering. Lith, Friya, and Phloria were inseparable during their days at the academy.

The girls rarely left him alone, studying and eating together. Phloria didn't leave his side even at night. Even though everything was clean like nothing bad had ever happened, seeing those corridors and all the common spaces still pierced her heart.

It reminded her of Yurial, of all the blood spilled. Lith's warmth and affection were the only lines of defense she had against the despair that would grip her mind if left alone.

The fifth year went by quickly. Lith never got out the academy, except for visiting Quylla, his dates with Phloria, and going back to his family. First, he had to deliver his niece, Leria, and later his little brother, Aran.

The final exams were easy for Lith. Soluspedia made the written exams a walk in the park. Casting spells in a closed classroom in front of the Professors didn't cause him any stress compared to Linjos's teaching methods.

Before the results came out, Lith was once again summoned to the Headmaster's office. This time there was no one beside Marth waiting for him. He seemed dead tired, but being his first year as Headmaster, it was understandable.

The pressure he was being subjected was nothing compared to Linjos's. The ancient noble households were not as overbearing as in the past, Balkor was missing, and not a single accident had occurred.

Yet Headmaster Marth was still learning the ropes and until all investigations and trials were over, it was his duty alone to take care of the academy's power core.

Lith sat in front of him, expecting the usual batch of bad news. The only time he had entered into a Headmaster's office without someone getting royally pissed off, was when Marchioness Distar introduced him to Linjos.

Chapter 325 Final Rankings Part 2

"I'm glad to see you have made a complete recovery. Your grades have not been affected in the least by what happened with Nalear. I wish I could say the same for the others." Marth sighed deeply.

The White Griffon now not only had fewer students than any other academy, but also the lowest average in terms of grades. Despite using the old exam system, many students had yet to recover.

The situation was so bad that the King had decreed the students of the White Griffon who failed their finals could attend the year a second time as a last chance. It was an unprecedented case in the academies' history, but so was Nalear's scheme.

"I've called you here to congratulate you on your achievements. You are ranked first overall and in the light department too." Marth handed him a piece of paper that listed the students in ascending order according to their points value.

Lith was ranked first with 14,456 (\*) points, Friya second with 12,486, and Phloria third with 10,753. Lith was surprised seeing the gap between the top three scores, especially since Phloria with only one specialization had run circles around the fourth ranked with her 8,731 points.

"Okay, if this is the off the record score, what will be the official one?" Lith was angered at the thought the events of the fourth year were about to repeat themselves. Before giving Marth a piece of his mind, Lith wanted to understand his reasons and how he would be compensated.

"That's the official one. I didn't input it in the system yet because I just received it too. Sorry for the misunderstanding." Marth handed him a gold griffon shaped pin and a white moonstone griffon shaped pin. Both had a five engraved on them.

Seeing the gold pin reminded him of Yurial, making Lith's heart ache for a second. He wore them nonetheless, placing the pins right above his heart.

"What does the asterisk near my score mean, then?" Lith asked.

"To avoid further embarrassment to the other students and academies, we have split your academic points from those you earned from sharing your spell. In light of its usefulness, the Council of the Headmasters has decided to value it 10,000 points."

Lith almost couldn't believe his own ears. It had taken a long time to assess Lith's Resonance spell's worth. Despite being a tier one spell, it had made it possible to reduce the time needed for recovering the full use of a regrown limb from years to months.

It was an invaluable tool, which allowed soldiers and mages alike to go from crippled to fit for duty faster than it had ever been thought possible.

"What do you mean with 'further embarrassment'?"

"Well, let's just say that our average sucks, but our third ranker has scored more points than the first rankers of the other academies." Marth replied with a smirk on his face.

"Now, I need to know if you are going to participate to the ceremonial graduation tourney."

"No, thank you." Only at the end of the fifth year, there would be a friendly competition among the students to demonstrate their battle prowess. Linjos's system made it obsolete, but it was still part of the academy customs.

Usually, the student ranked first would also be the winner of the tourney. For a lower ranked student to win the competition meant a huge boost in prestige for his family.

"Are you sure?" Marth asked. "It will not give you any points, but whatever you decide to do in the future, it could help you in your career."

"Absolutely." Lith nodded. "I have beaten all old noble households in the rankings. Winning the tourney would bring me only troubles. I think it's better to leave them a chance to prove themselves and restore their honor, rather than make more enemies."

"Besides, I survived a Valor, a wyvern, and even Nalear. I know I can beat any student of the White Griffon and that's enough for me. I don't have to prove myself anymore."

"That's great to hear!" The Headmaster could finally sigh in relief.

'Thank the gods Lith isn't another self-absorbed as\*hole. It's the best political choice he could make. Giving face to the noble households will make things easier for the academy and the Royals both. They will be really pleased when I'll report them this conversation.' He thought.

"It also brings us to the next topic." Marth handed him another pin. This one was shaped like Silverwing's Hexagram, but the lines connecting the six dots were depicted as broken in multiple points.

"Professor Farg, Constable Ernas, and Guard Ernas all testified your valour as a fighter against Nalear. The Crown has decided to make you an honorary member of the Spellbreaker order as a reward."

Spellbreakers were mages tasked with disposing of criminal practitioners of the mystical arts. According to what Farg explained to him at the beginning of the fifth year, even becoming an honorary one was a big deal.

It meant not only social prestige but also represented how much the Crown trusted him.

"I also have a job proposal for you that should benefit both of us." Marth steepled his fingers. Everything he said up to that point was in preparation for this moment.

Lith wore the third pin too, nodding.

"As you know, the White Griffon is short staffed. We lost one-fourth of our instructors. Finding so many talented and trustworthy Professors in such little time is not easy."

"Since you are still two years away from becoming an adult, I thought you could be interested in a position as Assistant Professor. You are too young and lack the experience to be a Professor, but your foundations are solid."

"We could use someone like you to cover for the basic lessons. It would give you a place to stay, a good income, and merits. If you accept, the Mage Association will take you as a member without the usual procedure."

"What about my sister?" Lith had already mentioned to him Tista wanted to attend the White Griffon academy.

"She can take the test. You have my word our judgment will be fair, but nothing more. We care only for talent. Admitting Tista just to have her fail at the first trimester would be a waste of our and her time both." Marth replied.

Lith pondered for a second about the answer.

'With her bright green core Tista will be among the weakest students, but since she is only interested in the Healing specialization, she should be fine. Also, if she is really going to Awaken, this way I can keep an eye on her and make sure Tista doesn't get into trouble.' Lith thought.

'Working for the academy also means unlimited funds and materials for my research. Plus all the time I need to keep copying magic books. It's an offer I can't refuse.'

When Lith accepted, Marth felt a huge burden lifted from his shoulders. Having Lith was a huge morale boost for the White Griffon academy. Nalear had destroyed its reputation and now many families were considering to transfer their children to more safe institutions.

Having the youngest Spellbreaker of the Kingdom among their ranks, who also happened to be considered the next god of healing, was just what the White Griffon's public relations needed.

Lith left the Headmaster's office and went to give the good news to his companions and family. It seemed they would soon be invited to the Royal Palace for a gala.

## Chapter 326 Goodbyes Part 1

Phloria and Friya were both surprised by their rankings. Even seven months after the events with Nalear, they still had to completely recover. The girls felt they were just scraping by, following Lith's study schedule only because it was too boring to waste the whole day drowning in self pity.

"Who would have ever thought that practicing first magic everyday would have improved so much our performances?" Friya kept staring at the paper Lith had handed them a few days ago.

"I did." He replied from the bathroom. "My problem during the fourth year was my lack of mana perception, yours of mana control. Practicing first magic fixed that."

Phloria nodded. She too regretted having always considered first magic just like servant's magic. If only she practiced it more, she could have achieved so much during the first four years of academy.

Their parents took the news enthusiastically, they couldn't wait to celebrate the happy event.

Lith came out of the bathroom wearing only his pants. During the last year he had grown even taller and was now 1.75 meters (5'9") high, almost as much as Phloria. The vision made Friya yelp and turn beet red.

Lith's face was still sharp, his eyes cruel, but when he didn't look at you with the intention to kill, he could be considered good looking. His body was another story. Between the physical training with Phloria and the core refinement, it was a sight to behold.

No impurities meant no imperfections during the growth spurt, no moles, no excess body hair or fat. Every inch of his body was chiseled like that of an Olympic athlete at his prime.

"Why don't you cover up?" She said turning half sideways, looking at him with one eye only.

"First, this is my room. Second, you should be used to my presence as much I am to yours since we spend almost all day together. Third, I have the right to hit on my girlfriend." His answer made Phloria giggle like a little girl, Friya not so much.

"Do you need my help again?" Phloria caressed his face.

"Yes." Lith sighed. Growth spurt also meant a growing beard, but unlike on Earth, his new body produced one like he was already twenty. It wasn't just a few hairs. It only needed a couple of days to turn into a stubble, four to start itching.

To make things worse, Lith couldn't resort to magic for shaving. Magic couldn't hurt its owner and the beard was still part of his body. So he had Phloria do it for him with air magic. That way, it would only take a couple of seconds to shave and it would also reinforce their mutual trust.

For Lith exposing his throat like that was a leap of faith. Friya knew it and her heart was riddled with envy from start to finish. It peaked when they shared a passionate kiss after Phloria finished without inflicting him even a small cut.

Ever since Balkor's attack, she had been jealous of them. Over time, the feeling had only grown. At first, she disliked Lith. He was too shady and had too many secrets. Then she had learned to appreciate him as a friend and a brother in arms.

After Nalear, though, things got so much worse. The multiple r\*pe attempts Friya suffered had left a deep scar in her heart. She had become much warier of those who approach her and thanks to Jirni's teachings she could easily spot the greed or lust in the eyes of her suitors.

All things that made the faces of her assailants pop in front of her eyes again, making her almost puke. She could never forget those eyes, staring at her like a thing to possess, as she was nothing more than her body or her title.

It killed all the chances she had got so far to have a boyfriend, leaving her utterly alone. After spending so much time together during the fifth year, Friya felt she was to a dangerous crossroad.

Between still don't like him as a boy as much as for what he represented and really like him. Lith was never condescending with her, never tried to impress her or to hide his real nature. He always treated Friya as a person and a friend.

That, plus his body and her being single from birth had a huge impact on Friya over time.

"Shouldn't you go change for the evening?" Lith asked while a thick black and white substance crawled up his skin, taking the form of a black evening suit with a white shirt.

"Is that the new evening clothes the Royals sent you?" Friya asked.

"Yes." Lith was appreciating the tailor made suit and its silky fabric. While the Ernas had their own tailor and bought their own clothes, Lith would always use the "I'm a poor commoner" excuse to have someone buy them for him

'There is no point in wasting money for something that I'll wear maybe twice in my life.' Was his reasoning. Truth to be told, he was still a cheapskate at heart.

"I should buy one of those things too. It looks a bit disgusting with those life like movements, but it would save me a lot of time. You have no idea how long does it takes to wear a corset, stockings, and fixing all those frills." Friya sighed in envy, leaving the room.

Phloria came out of the bathroom wearing a silk-satin red evening dress and white evening gloves, emphasizing her olive colored skin due to the prolonged exposure to the sun.

It was skin tight, with a neckline that somehow exerted a push-up effect. She wore part of her hair down, like a silky black waterfall that reached her thighs, while the rest formed a tress resembling a wreath over her head. It was decorated with flower shaped small jewels.

Lith's golden lily pendant was the only necklace she wore, drawing the attention on her slim neck.

"How do I look?" She asked with a tinge of red on her cheeks.

"Stunning, like always." He said embracing her before giving her a long, deep kiss.

"How did you fix your hair so fast?"

"You know how, silly." Phloria went in front of the mirror to finish the last details. Since she was already fully developed, Lith's treatment had a limited effect on her. It still made Phloria healthier, her skin smoother, and her hair didn't tangle anymore.

She only needed a couple of brushstrokes to fix them as she wanted. After Phloria checked the back of her dress, she made sure Lith's pins were placed at the eye level of an average man and properly emphasized by the black suit. Then, they went to pick Friya up.

She was wearing a long sleeved light blue evening dress with no neckline. It left exposed only her hands, neck, and shoulders. Jirni had to fight a lot to dress her up with something more cheerful than a battle monk suit. Friya didn't want people looking at her for a second more than necessary.

The dress had only the minimum requirement of embroidered jewels and frills to make it a Court Gala dress. Even with little to no make up and all her efforts to be as inconspicuous as possible, she was still lovely.

The skin tight dress brought out her soft curves while its colour emphasized her brown eyes.

## Chapter 327 Goodbyes Part 2

They reached the Warp Gate leading outside the academy, where their chaperons were waiting for them. The girls would bring along their parents while Lith had asked to Marchioness Distar and Count Lark to be his escort.

Raaz and Elina were too busy with the newborn Aran, plus they were completely oblivious about the Court etiquette. Bringing them along would be like inviting disaster to dinner.

"Thank you so much, dear Lith." Count Lark didn't seem to have aged a day. His black suit was brand new and so was the silk string preventing him to lose his black rimmed monocle which kept jumping out of his eye socket from excitement.

"I never attended a Royal Graduation ceremony before. I'll never thank you enough for giving me this opportunity."

"Don't mention it, old friend." Lith replied. "If it wasn't for you, I would have never attended an academy. I'm glad to have you by my side today and to be able to call someone like you a friend."

"If you or your family ever need my help, you just have to ask."

Lark had to fight back the tears. Lith's words moved him deeply.

Lith turned around, needing but a glance to notice something was out of place. Marchioness Distar had the smug grin you would expect from someone accompanying the three highest rankers in all the Griffon Kingdom.

Jirni looked at the two youths with the usual eyes full of expectations, like she hoped Lith had already proposed to Phloria or was about to. The odd thing was that instead of the polite and detached attitude usually Orion gave Lith, he seemed to be as eager as Jirni if not more.

Lith shrugged it off as one of the many false flags his paranoia pointed out.

The Warp Gate lead them directly inside the royal palace, just a few rooms away from the Banquet Hall. The Battle Mages and Mage Knights in charge of security didn't care for Jirni's Royal Constable badge.

Only after checking thoroughly their IDs and communication amulets the guards let them though. While waiting for the background checks to be over, Lith looked around the room.

'Disgusting. Despite this place is just a waiting room it's so full of gold and artworks to be tacky, at least by my standards.' He thought.

'That's just because you are stingy.' Solus reproached him

'The room is furnished with proper taste. It resembles the royal palace of Versailles from your memories, not a rapper's house. Royals have the duty to not only be powerful, but also to appear as such.'

The path towards the Banquet Hall was filled with marvels. Solus noticed at least fifty different arrays and countless magical treasures hidden inside the walls.

'To think that Balkor could bypass all this and attempt on the Royals' lives five years in a row makes you understand how powerful he is.' Lith and Solus thought as one.

The double doors leading inside were wide open. Before they could enter, a valet checked their IDs again before announcing their arrival, speaking with a magically enhanced voice.

The room was more than forty meters (133 feet) long and over thirty meters (100 feet) wide, with a single red silk carpet with gold embroidered edges going from the three meters (10 feet) wide double doors up to the two steps that distanced the floor where nobles stood and the raised one for the royal family.

That way, even while sitting, they would be able to look down on everyone present, reaffirming their status and authority.

The whole room was lighted by crystal chandeliers, fueled by magic, leaving no space for shadows or need for maintenance.

On the walls, magically enchanted tapestries would recount over and over the great feats that the current King had accomplished to be deemed worthy of his power. Both the floor and the pillars of the room were realized from gold veined marble, the most precious and robust material available in the Griffon Kingdom.

The room was filled with nobles of all ages and relevance, who quickly swarmed the three youths like vultures after spotting a fresh corpse.

"How does it feel being blessed by the light?" "Were you afraid while fighting the wyvern?" "How did you survive a Valor on your own?" "First Balkor, then Nalear. Did witnessing so much death change your attitude in life?"



Those were the questions he had to answer over and over again. He felt like a school shooting survivor forced to reply to the dumbest questions a reporter's mind could come up with to boost their audience.

The evening was long and boring enough to make Lith wish to never attend such an event again. 'I'd rather work the whole night as an Association's clerk.' He thought doing small talk with the students from other academies.

Only when the music started Lith managed to get away with the excuse of dancing. He hated dancing, yet he had long prepared for it with Phloria since the fourth year. To get what he wanted, Lith had to play by the rules. At least apparently.

Lith had researched Nalear's past. Despite being a talented Awakened one, despite having no bonds after abandoning her family, she had failed even to become an influential noble. The Griffon Kingdom, even with all of its faults, was too big to face it head on alone.

He danced with Phloria first and then with other noble dames, trying to establish their worth as connections. Solus would jot down their names, titles, and everything relevant they said. Which usually amounted to very little.

After a while, Lith took a couple of drinks and went together with Phloria on a balcony, to get some fresh air. She seemed to be more annoyed than he was, if not even sad. Lith's instinct raised another flag, this time too big to ignore.

"Cheer up. This nightmare will not last long. Worst case scenario we'll be back home in two more hours." He said.

"I'm sorry." Lith knew Phloria enough to know that whatever she was talking about, she meant it.

"Sorry about what?"

"I wanted to wait until the gala ended before telling you, but I don't want our last memory together to be us quarrelling." Her voice was sad. Only after taking a deep breath she looked Lith in the eyes.

"Okay, what the f\*ck are you talking about?" He touched her arm while activating Invigoration. She was fit as a fiddle, just like the last time he checked. Her impurities were still so far from the core it was impossible for her to have Awakened and being turned by the Royals in some sort of secret weapon.

"The academy is over. In less than two days I'm going back home. After that, I'll start the army's mandatory boot camp for new recruits. It will last six months with no breaks nor leaves. Then I'll be dispatched where my talents are needed.

"I don't know how long will it take for me to join the Knight's Guard nor it would be fair on you pretending things are going to stay the same. I think it's best if we break up before I leave the academy."

Lith was speechless, feeling like a big chunk of his heart had just been ripped off from his chest.

Chapter 328 Family Name Part 1

Pain was Lith's oldest friend, yet it took him a few seconds to recover.

"I thought you wouldn't leave before spring." Lith was looking forward spending the winter months together at her home again.

"The army is not the academy, silly." Phloria's laugh was low and joyless.

"There are boot camps all year round, so that people can enlist as soon as they become adults."

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier? Why now? Can't you delay it?"

"What would have changed?" Phloria sighed.

"We would have spent the time we had left arguing before you accepted my decision, as I know you will." She slowly caressed his face.

"Then you would be sulking the whole time. This way we had our happiness. As for your other questions, I need to go as soon as possible. Not because of my family, nor for the army. For myself." Phloria stared at the moon glowing up in the sky. Her voice was steeled with resolve.

"Ever since I joined the academy, I fancied myself a leader. Yet right from the mock exam I found myself lacking. Resolve, charisma, killing intent, tactics. Name one, I was good only on paper. All my training rarely survived contact with the enemy.

"I was either too scared, surprised, or reluctant to kill to be a good leader. Our whole group relied more on you than on me, myself included. Whenever something bad happened, I always looked up to my family and to you for help.

"After Yurial's death, I only found solace from my inner demons while in your company and that made me think. I'm not as strong and independent as I always wanted to be. I don't feel complete as a person.

"I'm tired of feeling helpless. I need to change, or at least give my all trying. Joining the army will give me this opportunity. Failure or success will depend completely on myself."

Lith could feel his heart going through its usual routine. Pain first, anger later.

'It's her life. She has every right of doing what she thinks is best for herself.' Lith thought.

'It's exactly what I have been planning to do from the beginning. I never changed my mind, not even after we got together. I knew this moment would come. Then why am I suffering so much?'

'Because you have ended up caring for them more than you ever anticipated. Especially Phloria.' Solus replied.

'You can't get angry at her. It would be petty and hypocritical.'

"I don't know where life will lead me. Even worse, I don't know what will become of you." Phloria kept staring at Mogar's moon. That night it was of an unusual pale blue color, giving the night the feel of a fairy tale.

"You said it yourself, remember? I guess you are the right person for me, but we met at the wrong time of our lives. There are too many variables, we are both too ambitious to plan ahead and shackle ourselves with a pointless long distance relationship.

"I want to be happy. I want you to be happy. We can't waste our time waiting for each other and fantasizing about what might have been. Life is short, Yurial taught us that. Maybe we'll meet again in the future.

"Until then, I want you to have the chance to live your life at its fullest. If you meet someone special, I want you to be able give her the love she deserves." Phloria took his hand expecting him to be sad or even angry.

What she found in his eyes was the look of someone who felt betrayed.

"Did you tell me all of this now to prevent me from making a scene?" Lith's allegation was cruel enough to make him and Solus both add 'petty' as his middle name.

"No. I did it only because I hope you can get over it before we go back home and not spoil our last days together." Her voice was calm. Lith's words had hurt her, but Phloria didn't let it show.

Lith gritted his teeth, knowing she was right. In any other moment, he would have been ranting, probably holding a grudge for who knows how long.

"I'm sorry for what I just said. Now if you'll excuse me, I want to be alone."

Phloria left him with his thoughts. Lith remained there for a while. The winter cold couldn't affect his enhanced physique and even if it did, the Skinwalker armor would protect him.

"Excuse me, sir." Said a voice behind him.

"What do you want?" Lith turned around, towering over the valet. In the Royal Court, even servants were actually nobles from important families. Serving the Crown was the highest honour.

The valet was actually a Duke with remarkable magical talents, yet he found himself shivering in fear. Lith's eyes were brimming with power and rage. Behind all that mana, the valet could clearly see Lith fighting the temptation to throw him off the balcony.

"His Majesty would like to confer with you, sir." The valet kept his cool, managing to deliver the message despite the profuse sweating affecting him at the moment.

Lith calmed down immediately, letting the man make way to his host. Inside the music was over. All the convened guests were gathered near the raised floor where the Royals were now standing.

"Today is a very special day." The King said with his deep, baritone voice as soon as Lith reached the front row with the servant's help.

"Today, simple men and women have become mages. It doesn't matter if they were commoners, merchants, or nobles. Now they stand here among us, as equals. Whatever path they take, they are the embodiment of the future of our Kingdom.

"I hope for all of them to achieve great things, to become what our Country will need during its darkest hours to come. Alone we are nothing. Together we are the most ancient Kingdom in the Galen continent. While others suffered from internal strife or lack of resources, we thrived.

"The only reason this miracle has endured the passing of centuries is that we never stopped improving ourselves. Those assembled here are the most powerful individuals of our Kingdom, but it's important for you to remember that without the people, we are nothing.

"Each one of our families was once a commoner one. We elevated ourselves with talent and hard work. Such an opportunity must always be offered to the worthy ones, no matter how humble their origins.

"If we allow our fears or petty grudges to influence our actions, the Griffon Kingdom will wither and fall. Tonight, there is a rare talent among us. Some say he has been blessed by the light at birth.

"I don't know if it's true, nor do I believe in superstitions. What I do know is that when we needed him, he helped us all. Even at the risk of his own life and family."

Lith inwardly grinned.

'I doubt King Meron is so naïve as to believe me so altruistic. We have bartered every time the price for my help. When I have taken risks, it was only because the alternative was worse. I like his selling pitch, though.'

## Chapter 329 Family Name Part 2

"Step forward, Lith of Lutia."

Lith did as instructed, kneeling in front of the raised floor as the ceremony required. King Meron placed his right hand over Lith's head while holding the staff representing the Crown's authority over magic in the other .

"For your services in curing the plague, for saving many lives during Balkor's last attack, and for your contribution in defending the White Griffon, I hereby award you the Verhen name. It will be extended to your family and passed down by your children.

"It grants to you and to you alone the same status of a Baron. Your starting fief will be the region of Lutia, under Count Lark's supervision, should you ever decide to trade your merits for the lands and responsibilities that a noble title implies.

"Stand up, Mage Lith Verhen!"

Lith did as ordered. The members of the Royal family applauded him, immediately followed by a standing ovation from the guests. Lith was supposed to be happy. Another milestone in his master plan had fallen into place.

Yet he felt empty, meaningless. Just like the sound of his new name.

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The following morning, the trio was in Phloria's room. The girls were making their final preparations for the tournament, while Lith had been using Accumulation non stop since the previous night.

Taking deep breaths was the only way he and Solus had found to keep his emotions in check. There was still a storm brewing inside of him and as it was for any storm, stopping it was impossible. Lith could only wait for it to pass.

"Do you still suffer from Death Vision?" Friya said as she came out of the training room. She and Phloria had just finished a light spar as warm up.

Lith nodded. Over time he had shared a few details about himself with her. In the space of a few seconds, Lith saw her die of poisoning, old age, and by decapitation.

"What about now?" She asked multiple times, coming closer and closer until at three meters distance Lith shook his head. Friya was alive and well now.

"What about her?" Friya pointed at Phloria, who was still in the training room.

"She's fine."

"I knew it!" Friya snorted. "I bet that the safe zone range depends on how much you care for the person. I guess three meters after two years is still better than nothing."

Lith didn't agree with her theory, yet he found it interesting. Back when Death Vision started, he would see everyone die, even his family, no matter the distance. For a long time, the only exception had been Phloria, but only when she was very close to him.

Over time, though, he had learned to control it with his willpower. Also, Lith had developed a safe zone, where people would appear normal as long they were within its range. Lith and Solus thought it depended on him mastering whatever Death Vision was, while Friya had a more romantic concept of it.

"Who do you think will win if we both get into the finals?" Phloria tried to change the topic. If her sister was right, it would make breaking up even more awkward.

"Do you want the cold truth or the boyfriend truth?" His voice was slow so he wouldn't lose his breathing rhythm.

"Cold truth." The girls replied as one.

"It's a coin flip. Phloria, you have a better technique while Friya has more fighting spirit. Since you are both Mage Knights, you'll want close combat. At that distance, a single strike can seal the result." Neither of the girls liked the answer.

Friya because she was aware of her limits, Phloria because she hoped he would be more supportive.

'What if you had to bet?' Solus asked.

'In that case, with a sword at my throat, I'd bet on Friya. She has a lot of pent up stress and the tendency to become more aggressive because of it. Phloria has a lot on her mind, I doubt she can show her full strength right now. Especially against her own sister.'

Solus sighed. The only thing that she hated more than a murderous Lith was an emotionless one.

The tournament took place in the academy's colosseum. It was a huge arena, located on the ground floor of the White Griffon that was usually off limits outside special events. Duels and fights were a relic of the past, relegating the use of the colosseum to be exclusively ceremonial.

To everyone's surprise, the whole Royal family was attending the event. Headmaster Marth offered to the King the role of arbiter for the event, but Meron politely declined.

Spectating was one thing. Participating in the event would mean giving it special importance, hurting the pride of the other academies.

Both girls fought fiercely, showing that the point difference between them and the other rankers wasn't just a fluke. They literally wiped the floor with any opponent they faced in ten moves at worst.

Linjos's legacy, the daily evaluation, was showing its worth in all the academies that employed its system. It forced the students to give their all every day, rather than cram the month before the exams and just learn by rote.

As Lith predicted, when Friya and Phloria fought in the finals, Phloria was unable to consider it more than a spar, losing to Friya's ruthlessness. Being right didn't make him happy. He was actually sad for her. The result only proved Phloria was right too.

She was still too soft.

The Royals applauded both contenders, giving House Ernas double the honor any other household had ever achieved in the academies' history. Never before had two of the first three rankers belonged to the same family.

It pissed off everyone present that wasn't part of the academy's staff, the Ernas, or the Royal family. Commoners and nobles alike had hoped that since the top ranker wouldn't attend, they would still have a chance to shine.

"It was truly a magnificent competition, your Majesty." Sitting next to King Meron there was Archduke Taben, family head of one of the most ancient households of the Griffon Kingdom and the father of the girl ranked fourth.

"It's too bad the first ranker didn't attend, right Xebas?"

"Indeed. It would have made an excellent show." Marchioness Xebas belonged to an almost as important family and her son was ranked fifth.

"Marth, why don't you ask him for an exhibition match? You can't leave your guests of honor with the curiosity about what the brightest talent of the White Griffon can do."

The two nobles didn't give a damn about Lith, their aim was to embarrass house Ernas. Jirni and Orion not only had received plenty of awards for defeating Nalear, but now their daughters were stealing all the spotlight. It was more than what the other households could bear.

Not that they could bear much anyway. The higher they got, the touchier they became.

"It's an interesting idea." King Meron scratched his beard.

## Chapter 330 Test Subject Part 1

"I would like to see Mage Lith in action, but it would be unfair on the Ernas girls. Their fight was intense and drawn out, they must be exhausted." The king wasn't an idiot. He immediately saw through their intentions and turned their plot against them.

"It's not only that." Queen Sylpha chimed in. "The Ernas and Verhen households have quite a past together. We can't ruin their friendship on a whim."

"My dear Queen is right, Taben." Meron nodded. "If your daughter passed the semi-finals, she would still have to fight an opponent. She can spar with him and show us her worth."

"They both can." Sylpha pointed out. "It was their parents' idea, after all. It's only fair for them to provide us with a show."

The nobles and Lith both inwardly cringed. Neither wanted to agree but refusing wasn't an option.

Lith and Clea Taben stepped into the arena together, placing themselves ten meters from each other. The Royals were really curious about Lith's real skills, so they used binoculars to shield their eyes and activate Life Vision.

The girl was tall and muscular. Like Phloria, she had the build of a professional swimmer.

"Is this safe, Headmaster?" Lith asked. "I'm not used to exhibitions, I don't know if I can hold back. Any fight outside of training, I've always gone straight for the kill."

"Very safe. Besides the Life Preserving array of the academy, there is also the First Blood Array of the colosseum. As soon as one of you gets hit, the fight ends."

Marth wasn't happy either, but when the Royals gave an order, he could only comply.

"Are you ready?" He asked both youths.

Lith's reply was a deep, guttural roar. It released all the stress and the killing intent he had kept sealed up to that point.

'Easy there! Be careful to not release an aura!' Solus warned him. During the fifth year they had discovered that, unless fake mages used a spell, they were incapable of spreading their mana outside their bodies.

Jirni, Orion, and Phloria were the only ones to have seen Lith and Nalear both doing it. It was a dangerous tell about being an Awakened one.

Lith's killing intent sent a shiver down the spectators' spines despite the distance separating them from the arena. Marth took the brunt of it due to his proximity, but as a battle hardened veteran he was able to hold his ground.

The girl, however, was paralyzed.

"Begin!"

The Headmaster's voice snapped her out of it. Clea began to cast a tier four Battle Mage spell while stepping backward.

'Lith is only a Forgemaster and a Healer. If I don't let him get close it's my win.' She thought.

Unfortunately for her, Lith sprinted forward at a barely human speed of ten meters per second, covering the distance between them in an instant.

All Clea could see was Lith's open palm striking her chin from below before her vision became a blur. He grabbed Clea's face, lifted her up with one hand, and slammed her head into the ground with one fluid movement.

Then, everything went black.

Marth intervened immediately. Both arrays had activated at once which saved her life, but Clea's condition was still critical. Her jaw was just dislocated while her skull was fractured in several points.

"Come here." Lith said while taunting his other opponent as soon as Marth got Clea out of the arena, leaving her in Vastor's care.

Laeo Xebas had fallen on his a\*s after Lith's roar and had yet to find the strength to get up.

"I yield." He squealed, putting an end to the exhibition. The Royals didn't bother hiding their disappointment, applauding the contestants purely out of courtesy. Marchioness Xebas was pale as a ghost.

At least the Teben's heir had attempted to fight, while her son had cowardly backed down in front of all her peers. Archduke Teben didn't share her optimism. He had clearly heard the Queen clicking her tongue in disgust at her daughter's performance.

"What an idiot." Sylpha said loud enough for the two nobles to hear.

"Like a magical beast or even an enemy soldier would be polite enough to give you the time to complete such a complex spell. She should have restricted his movements first."

"Cut them some slack, dear." King Meron replied.

"The difference in battle experience was like heaven and earth. Also, they probably have yet to recover from Nalear's attack."

The kindness in Meron's words was merely superficial. He was actually agreeing with his wife, saying that Lith's opponents were both physically and mentally weak.

Teben and Xebas turned even paler, recognizing the true meaning of those words. Yet they could only curse at their own stupidity. With their behavior, the Royals had sent them a message.

The Ernas Household was under their protection. As for Lith, after basically proclaiming him as a national hero just a day prior, now they had referred to him as a proper Household in front of many witnesses.

Messing with him was barely safer than sticking their heads in a dragon's mouth.

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Royal Palace, one hour later.

"It's a shame Lith's opponents were so weak. I guess we'll never know if he really is an Awakened one or not." King Meron was still upset. He had seen foot soldiers perform much better than Clea Xebas.

"We didn't have much to work with." Queen Sylpha nodded.

"He was fast, for a human, but nothing more. His mana flow is weaker than ours, only Lith's life force was remarkable. Yet him being so tall and young makes that unsurprising."

"What do you think we should do about Lith?" Meron asked.

"Treat him as if he is an Awakened. I'm willing to bet he really is one, even though Lady Tyriss says otherwise."

"How so?" The King had reached the same conclusion on his own. They were having that conversation in front of their children as a learning experience. Even though it was unlikely for Lady Tyriss to select one of them as the next ruler, they would still play a major role in the Kingdom's future.

"Because too many things do not add up. His achievements are too outstanding for someone his age. Plus, based on what Captain Yerna and Constable Ernas said, his mastery of the Gatekeeper sword's powers is unnatural for a fake mage."



Even if I'm wrong, even if he is just the combat oriented version of Manohar, Lith is still a good investment. His sister has gotten admitted to the White Griffon too. If she manages to graduate, the Verhen household will be recognized as a magical bloodline.

Not to mention Tista and Lith have gained a little brother and a niece."

"By the gods. Four mages in a single generation would be terrifying!" Meron put enough emphasis on his words to make his children turn pale.

"My point exactly." Sylpha sighed.

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Verhen Household AKA Lith's house. A week later.

Lith's life as a student was over for good. He and Phloria had broken up right before leaving the academy, which left him with a small hole in his heart.

Not even Tista scoring 82/100 at her admission test for the academy lifted his spirits. Lith was in a terrible mood, to the point that even his family couldn't soothe his grumpiness.