# **Chapter 286 — Once In A Lifetime**

Arthur Leywin POV.

I felt somewhat bad.

Chief Mason’s son, Braxton, had won the Striker’s tournament, meaning he would be sent to Aramoor to become a student at Stormcove Academy. Any other day, Braxton would’ve been the center of attention for his victory, and the target of envy from his peers. Not only Braxton’s, but his entire family’s status would be elevated within Maerin Town and—if he did well at Stormcove—all of Aramoor.

However, after Cromely had congratulated Braxton on winning the tournament and half-heartedly said he was looking forward to seeing him at Stormcove, the old representative practically pushed the poor boy off stage and announced a “once-in-a-lifetime event” for the citizens of Maerin Town and the other nearby towns.

The crowd quickly forgot about the exhibition and erupted into cheers as Aphene, Pallisun, and I stepped out onto the field with Cromely standing between us. Workers quickly removed the raised platform where the Strikers had fought since we’d need more space, leaving only the grassy floor of the arena.

“Thank you for agreeing to spar with us,” Pallisun called out loud enough for the audience to hear. More quietly, he said, “We were afraid you would decline.”

“The pleasure is mine,” I said, ignoring the haughty undertone in his gratitude.

Both students had changed from their formal attire. While their armor looked more like a fashion statement than functional battleware, their weapons told a different story.

Pallisun withdrew a coffin shield his dimension ring; the ungainly shield was nearly as tall as he was, and twice as wide. Aphene, meanwhile, held a claymore with a pearlescent blade in her right hand, and her entire left arm was covered in a silver bracer.

“Following the standard rules of non-lethal duels, weapons are permitted but must be blunted. Magic is expected, but control should be utilized to avoid dealing grievous injury, and no effects used that risk injury to the audience. All combatants must adhere to the commands of the moderator.” Cromely announced the rules with a practiced air. “When the combatants are ready, we will begin.”

The three of them waited silently for me to withdraw my weapons but I shook my head. “I’ll fight barehanded.”

Aphene stepped forward, eyes narrowed. “Are you looking to blame your defeat on the lack of a weapon, Ascender Grey?”

*‘Nnngh! They’re so cheeky,’* Regis growled, bristling with anger.

“I promise to blame only myself in the event that I’m defeated,” I replied calmly before turning to Cromely. “Now, can we begin?”

The old man let out a cough before stepping back several paces, holding his right hand high in the air.

“*Begin!”* Cromely belted out as his hand swung down.

Immediately, the crowd began to cheer. Pallisun held up his shield to cover both himself and his partner, and the pair studied me closely. They had no clue, I realized, whether I was a Caster, Shield, or Striker.

After a brief pause, the two charged forward. Though both were hidden from view behind the large shield, I expected Aphene was preparing to launch her first attack, likely something intended to probe my defenses and feel out my fighting style.

Taking a dueling stance with both arms relaxed at my sides, I pondered on how to approach this. Without being able to sense their mana levels, I couldn’t be sure exactly how powerful they were, but based on what I had seen from the Alacryan students at the exhibition, I had to assume that the top students from Stormcove Academy would be on the level of an A-rank adventurer.

With my aether reserves barely at the ten percent mark, there was just enough danger to keep me on my toes.

Pallisun kicked up a storm of dust behind him as he charged toward me. Sidestepping out of the way was simple enough, but Aphene was waiting for that, brandishing her claymore. Her dark hair fluttered in the wind as she swung in a broad arc, which I hopped back from, followed by a lunge, which I sidestepped.

Meanwhile Pallisun made a sharp turn, aided by precise bursts of wind. His shield glimmered just a few feet away, like a bull leading with its horns. “You’re going to have to do more than just dodge!” the shieldwielding student roared.

Their movements were well-practiced and without blatant openings. Aphene used Pallisun as protection—and an obstruction to limit my view of her—while launching devastating attacks with the big two-handed sword. As well as the pair fought together, I didn’t doubt their ability to rival even a veteran AA-rank adventurer.

Unfortunately for them, with my experience supplemented by the inhuman reflexes that I had inherited, they might as well have been calling out their moves.

Pivoting on my front foot, I redirected Aphene’s next lunge with my hand against the flat of her blade. At the same time, I stamped my back foot into the ground just as Pallisun was about to tackle me.

With my foot obstructing Pallisun’s charge, he flew over my shoulder, barely able to hold on to his shield. Aphene had put most of her weight into the lunge, making her body lurch forward as her attack missed its mark. Making use of her imbalance, I hit her with an open palm square on her gauntlet.

Aphene toppled to the ground, then stumbled awkwardly as she attempted to roll quickly back to her feet. If this were a life-or-death battle, she had already given me more than enough opportunity to strike her unguarded back. Pallisun fared better, using his wind magic to reposition himself in the air to land deftly on his feet.

My gaze lingered on the two naive students, both now glowering angrily, though the anger was framed neatly with the flush of embarrassment.

Aphene Mandrick POV.

“What’s with those faces?” the ascender asked, tilting his head to the side. “You should’ve expected this much from an ascender, right?”

I studied the pretty man. Despite his toned but slender frame and unarmed state, I couldn’t help but begin to fear him. His golden eyes, nonchalant expression, and charming manner should’ve come off as amiable, but he had all the warmth of a predator seeking blood.

Unwilling to show any weakness, though, I swallowed my emotions.

“We didn’t want to accidentally hurt you. My apologies for underestimating your prowess.” I circled around him and stepped half behind Pallisun’s shield. Through gritted teeth, I added, “*It won’t happen again.*”

Pallisun, next to me, abandoned his shield as if to punctuate my point. Realizing that our opponent was clearly a Striker, he withdrew the two heavy plate gauntlets that he had inherited, as the next in line of the Blather blood.

The wind hummed and hissed as he curled his fingers into a fist. With a grunt, Pallisun dashed forward. I followed shortly behind.

Pallisun swung his wind-clad fist, hitting only thin air as the ascender easily stepped back before kicking him the chest. Despite the weight difference between powerfully built Pallisun and the ascender, my partner slid backwards across the ground and doubled over, gasping for breath.

Not willing to give the ascender even a moment’s chance, I leaped past Pallisun and swung Harmony downward in a feint. My sword’s shimmering blade whistled as it cut through the air just in front of the ascender, but I channeled a flood of mana into my sword arm in order to change the trajectory of my blade mid-swing.

My own sword’s motion was a blur, and even I was barely able to follow it, but somehow, his pale hand had grabbed my wrist out of the air.

“Not bad.” Despite how thin and delicate his hand looked, he held my wrist in an iron grip.

Letting Harmony fall, I caught it with my free hand and thrust forward, but he again side-stepped, the movement so nonchalant it looked like he was stepping around a mud puddle while out for an afternoon stroll.

“Try again,” he said as if he were my instructor rather than my opponent. The ascender released my hand—then *pushed* me square in my shoulder.

My whole body jerked back from the sudden force before I could spin away from the impact, and Pallisun just managed to get out of the way before I tripped over him.

As the two of us recovered, we stood side to side with weapons up in defensive positions. However, the ascender merely stood there with that aloof—almost bored—expression of his.

“Cocky bastard.” My partner spat on the ground and straightened himself. Swirling wind picked up from nowhere and encased his entire body.

He gave me a knowing look and I nodded in understanding.

*Just like how we’ve been practicing.*

Bursting forward once more, we approached the ascender from different angles. I dug in my heels and prepared to thrust Harmony's point at him just a few steps shy of reaching him, while at the same time Pallisun ducked low and aimed for the legs.

However, by the time I began to channel lightning through my arm and into my blade, the ascender had flashed past Pallisun and was right in front of me.

Moving with uncanny precision, he dodged my thrust. Then the world suddenly flipped as I found myself in the air.

A rush of wind oriented me enough to aim the spell that I had been channeling, and I unleashed the voltaic spear from the point of my blade while still falling to the ground.

Yet even the fastest element couldn’t catch the ascender off-guard as he stepped out of view, his body a blur.

By the time my feet had touched the ground, the ascender had tripped Pallisun, spun him around mid air, slammed him into the grass, and thrust his fist down at my partner’s chest. Thankfully, Pallisun had managed to bring his arms up in a crossguard, but the sheer strength of the impact cracked the earth beneath him.

Immediately, I hopped back to maintain my distance rather than try to fight in close quarters against this monster.

I swung Harmony in a broad arc. A shockwave of lightning ripped out of my blade and arced toward where the ascender stood on top of Pallisun. Focusing more mana into my emblem, I willed the voltaic crescent to split into a dozen separate projectiles. It took all of my concentration to control the chaotic nature of lightning into the form that I wanted, but in the split second it took me to do this, the ascender hauled Pallisun from the ground to use as a human shield.

“Coward!” I cursed, dispersing the spell just before it hit my partner.

“I’m the one fighting without a weapon.” The wheat-haired ascender frowned as he peeked out from behind Pallisun’s unconscious body. “But I’m confused. Are you a Striker or Caster?” *Is he not even taking this seriously?*

Both Pallisun and I had tested into the threshold of a high-tier mage—he as a Shield and myself as a Striker. The evolution of one of my crests into an emblem had allowed me even fire lightning over a distance.

Yet this ascender, who seemed to be using only pure mana, was dancing circles around us like we were toddlers barely able to walk.

The ascender’s gaze flickered down to Pallisun, who was struggling in his arms. In a mocking tone, he said, “You think you can stand up if I let you go?”

“Screw you!” my partner roared, unleashing a dome of enhanced gravity around them. The short grass was flattened, and even I felt the pull of gravity weighing down on me.

Pallisun’s first emblem took a heavy toll on him with his current mana capacity. Since he had decided to use it, then I shouldn’t hold back either.

“Hold on!” I shouted as Pallisun broke free from the ascender’s weakened grip.

My partner and the ascender broke out into a close-quarter brawl. Even within the gravity field that should’ve been slowing down his movements, however, the ascender seemed unimpeded.

Wasting no time, I ignited my second emblem.

“Aphene, stop!” I heard my grandfather’s concerned voice in a drawl as the entire world shifted into slow motion.

My body protested as mana coursed through my emblem, releasing voltaic mana that coursed through my veins like thousands of small pinpricks. I could feel every inch of my body electrified with energy, renewing my confidence.

In a way, the ascender’s capabilities would work in our advantage.

With the footage our artifact would capture from this fight, Pallisun and I would surely be able to get into an ascender’s academy in the central dominion.

My gaze flickered to the ascender who—even as he fought against Pallisun—was watching me with an expression of surprise, and he seemed to be genuinely interested in what I was doing for the first time.

*It’s not surprising. Internal lightning magic is rare, and this one is a high-tier emblem.*

Tuning out my grandfather’s shouts, I approached their duel. “Pallisun!”

The emblem on my partner’s lower back blazed underneath his tunic, and the dome of heightened gravity condensed around his gauntlets to form a glassy aura that blurred the space within it.

A confident smile crossed Pallisun’s worn face as he activated the full effects of his precious artifact, which had been designed for Blood Blather’s inherent affinity for gravity magic.

Once he was able to fully master his emblem and gauntlets, Pallisun would be able to not only block physical projectiles, but redirect magical ones as well through the use of the repellent force.

Even in his current state, he was a force to be reckoned with. With me by his side, even a full-fledged ascender would be hard-pressed to beat us, let alone one that had just barely finished his first ascent.

“Interesting!” the ascender said, beaming. He had broken off his exchange with Pallisun, stepping away, choosing to watch with interest as my partner activated his artifact instead of pressing the attack. Then, with a terrible grin, he shifted his footing and prepared to charge toward us.

I had known he was fast—he’d been little more than a blur or flash of color during our previous exchanges—but even with my internal lightning spell greatly heightening my senses and reflexes, I was barely able to keep up with his movement.

Pallisun managed to bring his arms up to defend against the ascender’s strike, allowing me to step around my partner and swing at the man’s exposed side.

The world moved in slow motion around me while my senses took everything in: the crunch of grass and dirt beneath my feet, the whistle of Harmony’s blade cutting the air, and the resounding thud of the ascender’s fist hitting Pallisun’s gauntlet.

Yet, before I could finish the blow, the ascender spun on his heels, closing the distance between us so that my attack swung harmlessly behind the man’s back. He trapped my sword arm under his own and swept my legs out from under me.

I could follow every moment of the ascender’s brilliant maneuver, from his footwork, to his apparent ability to predict the position of my swing while timing his own movements. Following and reacting, however, were two different stories.

Before he could finish his move, Pallisun managed to throw a gravity-imbued punch from behind the ascender. It wasn’t surprising to see that he was able to dodge: one of his emblems, or even a regalia, must have given him a pair of eyes behind his head.

This time, however, the field of gravity surrounding my partner’s gauntlet expanded just as it passed the ascender’s head, *pushing* him just enough for me to wiggle free from his grasp before executing a lateral handspring to right myself.

My left leg throbbed like it was on fire from that simple kick, but I managed to put enough weight on it to follow up Pallisun’s attack with a low horizontal sweep with Harmony.

The ascender pivoted back, dodging my strike, and at the same time, hooking his leg behind the inside of Pallisun’s knees. Before I could even warn Pallisun, the ascender kicked his leg back and swung a straightened arm right at his face.

Pallisun’s neck snapped back from the force, while his legs flailed up in the air before the back of his head smashed against the ground in a resounding crash.

A guttural yell tore free from my throat as I charged the ascender.

*I can do this. I can still read his movements. As long as I can read him, I can react.*

The ascender looked back over his shoulder with an impatient gaze, causing me to involuntarily flinch. He turned toward me and paused, giving me the time I needed for my next attack.

Currents of electricity coiled around me, reassuring me that I could win this exchange, and my eyes tracked every inch of his body for signs of his next move.

His left shoulder twitched, and I responded by bringing Harmony up to defend my left side. Then his right shoulder twitched, followed by his left arm rising. I tried to predict all of his movements, to react to each one individually, but by the time he was in range of my blade, his hand was at my throat.

His grip was gentle, with just enough pressure to let me know that he had won.

He didn’t simply win: he had used my most powerful spell against me.

Withdrawing my mana, I dropped my sword. “I-I concede.”

It was when I spoke that I realized I had been holding in my breath. As I acknowledged my defeat, my shoulders slumped and the trapped air escaped from my lungs.

I was frustrated, disappointed, and envious of the man who stood in front of me. But more than anything, I realized I was relieved—relieved that he wasn’t truly my enemy.

Because I knew that, had he considered this a real fight, I wouldn’t be alive.

The entire arena shook as the crowd erupted into cheers, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“It was a good fight,” he said in a low voice as he lowered his hand from my throat. “But you shouldn’t rely so heavily on something you have no idea how to properly use.”

“Aphene!” the familiar voice of my grandfather rang from behind me.

The ascender patted my shoulder as he walked past me. “Do you have a name for that spell?”

“There’s no official name for it in the records,” I admitted weakly, turning my head toward him. “I just call it internal lightning.”

He looked back with the strangest smile, his golden eyes gleaming. “How about naming it ‘Thunderclap Impulse’?”