

DEMONS 1231

[Chapter 1231 1231 Burning Guilt](#)

Kat's group dispersed quickly after that. Marigold was happy to leave, the chance to talk more with Oditr not being a rare one for the elf. March was happy to leave as well. Work hard, sleep early, was probably a doctrine the human followed. Burgandy was pouting a bit, but that was all. Burnice just... slipped away. Lily of course, fell asleep as soon as Oditr left the table and Kat had to carry her girlfriend back to their room.

Which was where she lay now. Staring up at the ceiling. Kat couldn't sleep. Sure she could meditate... but she wasn't really feeling that either. It had been interesting hearing about how March's team got together, as well as everyone's various stories. It was an interesting look into the people of this world... but that wasn't really the problem.

No the problem for Kat was that she'd spent the whole day doing nothing, and yet, hadn't really relaxed either. It was like her body couldn't quite shift out of combat mode. Which was annoying considering she hadn't even participated in combat today. The log chopping contest certainly didn't count as combat.

Still, perhaps it was enough to trick her mind into thinking she was in a combat situation for some reason. Dodgeball was more easily rationalised away. Even if it wasn't really dodgeball, the familiar name probably helped Kat discard it as a problem. So here she was. Laying on the bed with Lily curled up in Memphis form on her chest. Staring at the ceiling.

*So... what are you going to do now Kat? Stare up at the ceiling for the rest of the night? I can get up guilt-free in just six hours, probably five really, even if breakfast won't be ready by that point. Probably shouldn't push it back to four. Though it's not like Lily will be awake before eight, and even then I might have to wake her up to ensure she eats breakfast. Though, once again, I'm not participating today so I suppose it doesn't truly matter.

What else could I do? Wake up and train? I know what I want to train... but what if cutting of the link while Lily is dreaming wakes her up? I'd hate for my restlessness to wake her, and even worse, if she feels my pain through the link and starts thinking that something bad has happened to me. I'd feel just awful if that happened. Lily would probably struggle to go back to sleep after that as well...*

Kat was likely underestimating Lily's ability to sleep, and sleep through things. Especially when their connection was deep enough that distinguishing 'pain' from 'pain, panic and surprise' at being attacked or something similar, was quite strong. In the end though, it was at least in part just an excuse for Kat. She didn't know what she wanted to do, and this helped push the decision back just a little bit further.

It took a full hour of this before Kat decided to leave. She carefully moved Lily from her stomach to the pillow she'd been using and hoped it was warm enough for Lily not to notice. Of course, Lily immediately noticed, her nose twitching, eyes scrunched in dissatisfaction, but she didn't wake up. Kat still frowned at the sight, but her desire to go for a walk was stronger. If Lily was awake she'd stay, but for now? It was time to adventure.

Kat walked carefully through the halls, making sure not to wake anyone. She nearly yelled in surprise when she found 'Mint' behind the counter. It was certainly her body, and the eyes were open, but there

was clearly nobody home. The body wasn't moving at all, and the eyes looked dull and lifeless. Kat even waved her hand in front of it just to test. **NOVELnext.com**

Ok this is just weird. Like... I know these bodies the dryads use aren't actually their bodies... but Thyme makes it seem so fluid. As if the body is just an extension and they're more like shapeshifters. Seeing the one Mint uses just... sitting here completely motionless is more than a bit disturbing. It's almost like she's been turned to stone by Medusa or something. It's weird.

Shaking away those creepy thoughts, Kat made her way out of the inn and onto the beach. Just as Kat was about to pick a random direction, she saw a burst of light off towards the end of the island. With a shrug Kat turned that way and headed off. Curious to see what she'd find. Kat sped up a bit when she saw the light show continuing, so it didn't take long for Kat to spot what was going on.

Asteodia was playing with fire. Literally. She was probably just practicing her magic, but the way she was looking at the bonfire she'd built up was a bit weird. Kat couldn't place the emotions on Asteddia's face, though that was probably because most of it was facing away from Kat.

A quick jog later and Kat was there. "Hello Asteddia, can't sleep either?" asked the demon.

Asteodia turned slowly, apparently not scared by Kat's presence... only to just nod and turn back to the fire. "Um... are you alright?" asked Kat.

Asteodia sighed. "Not really. I guess sometime in the afternoon it sunk in that I nearly cost myself a chance at the win this afternoon. Might be even worse that my idea wasn't even good enough to get second place, so it was a stupid risk I never should've taken," I think you should take a look at

"But it was just a mistake right?" said Kat.

"That's just an excuse," bit out Asteddia. "The fact that it was a mistake is probably worse then if I'd intended it. At least if I acted with intention, ready to accept the consequences I could hold my head up high for making a decisive play, and failing. No instead I make a mistake that would've seen me take last place, and perhaps had my whole team penalised if Thyme felt like it... and I did it, by mistake. I can't afford to make such mistakes,"

Well this isn't exactly what I thought I'd be doing with my night, but it sure beats wandering around aimlessly pretending I know what I'm doing. Now I can pretend I know how to give people therapy! Yay! "I mistake is nothing to be ashamed of Asteddia, they happen to everyone, and this one didn't even have any consequences," said Kat.

"Then how will I ensure that I remember for next time if there was no punishment?" shot back Asteddia.

Holy shit, if that doesn't scream 'I have parental issues' I don't know what does. It could not be less clear if she was wearing a signboard that said 'I hate my parents'. Question is... what exactly do I do about it? This is a larger landmine then I thought it was a few seconds ago. I'm really not qualified for this. I mean, helping kids deal with losing their parents? That's something I can do. Whatever this is? What if I just make it worse?

Kat didn't let her doubts show on her face, instead she relied on what experience she did have, "It seems to me that you're already punishing yourself quite thoroughly. If you really don't think this counts as a punishment, then would you look so melancholy?"

"If it truly is a punishment, it is a weak one," said Asteodia.

"Well your mistake was hardly a major crime. That's like asking why a thief isn't immediately sentenced to death. Especially if they were just a hungry child. You're only just becoming an adult Asteodia, and this was a very small mistake in a rather controlled environment. The harm done, is entirely negligible," said Kat carefully, looking for any negative reactions Asteodia might have to the explanation. So far so good.

"I suppose I can continue with this punishment then... if it even counts as one," said Asteodia.

Not where I was going with this. "Are you sure? Should you not wait till the tournament is over so that your punishment won't interfere with the future rounds?" And maybe you forget it all together or your team will be nearby to stop you? "Surely it's not good to be missing out on sleep right now," explained Kat.

Asteodia frowned at Kat's point. "Punishment should be administered immediately... but the potential for my own performance to suffer, leading to additional mistakes and additional punishments should be avoided... hmm... no I think punishment immediately is still the right choice,"

Kat scrambled for an answer, and managed one that was, hopefully, convincing, "Well are you really punishing yourself right now? Or are you also punishing your teammates? If you don't do well, everyone on your team is punished not just you. Isn't that kind of selfish?" *Really not how I wanted to spin this... but if it works?*

Asteodia seemed to freeze up for a second before nodding, "Yes... yes you make a good point. I suppose it would not do to punish my team members for my mistake. I shall try and rest, and then punish myself later, as you suggested,"

God dammit. I guess it's fine for now... maybe I should enlist Marigold to help? Sure she's more on the wanting punishment side then the giving it... but I can't think of who else I can talk to about this. Marigold won't be allowed to compete today anyway, so it should be a good chance to talk...

[Chapter 1232 1232 Fiery Footsteps](#)

Kat felt no embarrassment at all as she quickly washed Asteodia and then tucked her into bed. Sure she wasn't used to doing that with someone so old, but Asteodia had sort of broken down crying on the walk back and Kat went into autopilot. Now that Asteodia was tucked into bed, Kat found herself with nothing to do once again, so she left the inn and started to practice her katas.

Which quickly revealed a problem. Now that she was focusing on them, something had clicked in her mind and she realised she was MISSING something from the movements. What that was, she had no idea. She'd need to ask someone about that. Hopefully she could visit Minor again, and ask their slime friend Mai. That or Thyme would have some advice, but Kat didn't really want to ask Thyme, as it would likely eat up their 'prize' for this round.

With her katas hitting a dead end, Kat instead practiced flying at high speed by shooting back and forth across the island as quickly as possible. This also became boring pretty quickly. It turned out, having a great memory and dynamic vision while running through an unchanging obstacle course made it really simple. Kat didn't even need to spend half an hour running it before she could clear the whole thing blindfolded. In fact she did. Twice.

"Right... well that's a bust," Kat said to herself as she glided through the air above the island. The inn giving off the only light in the area, just a small lantern out the front that marked it for all to see from a distance. The rest of the island was empty and the night was really quite cloudy so even the stars were hard to make out through all the fog. "Why do I feel so restless?"

Kat hovered around as she searched for an answer. She could only come up with one thing, "Is it really that? It feels so stupid..." mumbled Kat. She'd realised that perhaps the reason she was freaking out happened to be the lack of danger itself. She was on a mission. She'd left earth and had prepared for combat... but there was just nothing here. At least in the previous tournaments there was some sense of tension. Here, Thyme was doing everything they could to get people to relax.

Apparently, it was backfiring spectacularly when it came to Kat. *Am I really that weird? I suppose it's not as though I can't relax at home... but I feel so agitated right now. Could it just be the mana or something? I know I'm supposed to use my demonic energy regularly, but I've been doing that. I've been speeding my mind up plenty, and I spent all of yesterday evening practicing. Was that not enough? Or is my assumption completely wrong?*

Shrugging, Kat decided to try. She flew a bit away from the island and then let her energy loose. Purple flame instantly started to burn around her as it quickly engulfed Kat's frame. Still, the drain was actually pretty minimal. Kat kept going, pushing as much demonic energy into the fire as she could. The fire fed on the energy hungrily, growing larger and larger until it stood more than three stories high and much denser. Kat felt her energy practically evaporating in the process and cut things off just before reaching empty.

Kat let her body relax as she fell downwards in a sharp glide. Ignoring the fact that most of the nearby clouds had been turned to ice and quickly dropped out of the sky themselves. Kat could still see the fire burning as she let herself drift downwards, but it was shrinking rapidly.

*Well I do feel drained after that... but I can't say I feel any calmer. Not really. Or maybe a bit? I think that's more of a reflection on the fact that I'm tired now. I might actually be able to get to sleep... hmm... but it's pretty close to morning now, and I'm just not sure I want to try. Probably best to just stay awake.

Wait. Could that be it? I've been sleeping quite a lot lately, or well, not a lot a lot, especially not compared to Lily but I needed less sleep after getting to Rank 2, and probably again after Rank 3 but I never really pushed it at Rank 3. Have I just spent too much time sleeping over the last however many days or weeks? It better not be that, or I'll be rather annoyed. I rather like sleeping with Lily she's very adorable and I'd have to give that up just because I need less sleep.

I wonder if meditation has the same problems? It might. Hmm... is this why we have a Wrath faction? Not just because demons can get angry, but because for some of them if there isn't enough action they start to get antsy? I mean, it's nothing I can't ignore and I certainly don't feel like jumping into a fight

right this moment, but I could imagine if I left it for too long, or I was more martially inclined that's what I'd end up doing. I think you should take a look at

Wait... is that why people like Sue have so much sex? Is it just a coping mechanism for whatever this feeling is?*

Kat looked around at the sky. *Nah. I'm probably just blowing this out of proportion. Everyone, even humans just have nights like this. I know this for a fact considering I've had them in the past. And even if I don't count for some reason, the fact I've been woken up to help kids who can't sleep many, many times sure does point to that fact. Woops. Guess I got a bit existential a bit ago.*

With that minor existential crisis averted, Kat made her way down to the beach to see if the sandcastles were still around. She was a little surprised when she did stumble on them. The fact they were still around wasn't a surprise. The fence around them all was though. Kat, just out a curiosity reached a hand over the fence to find an invisible wall that felt pretty solid. "Huh... seems like Thyme is going to preserve these. Might be waiting to ask the competitors if they can be kept. Hmm... well I wasn't planning to mess with them anyway so it doesn't really matter to me. Though... hmm... I wonder if wind can get through? Best not to test it,"

Kat nodded at the fence before she resumed her wandering. This time she focused on releasing just enough fire from her feet so that she left a visible trail of fiery footprints as she walked. It was a really neat effect, and with a bit of extra mental effort she could ensure the fire was focused on duration instead of damage. *ηOveℓnext.com*

*Huh... that's a really neat little technique and I came up with it just to do something very silly. It makes my fire much less cold but... perhaps more deadly? It's really stuck to the sand, and I'm not sure what it would take to remove it. I'll have to keep this in mind for combat. I could probably make fake napalm with this. That's stuff is pretty deadly right? Though... is using it a war crime? Hmm... I don't think so? Probably against civilians? Maybe? I wonder if Lily has the Geneva Convention memorised. I wouldn't be surprised if she did. I've never read the thing so I don't think I could just search my mind for the answers.

Kat let out a small laugh. Oh god, what a question to wake Lily up with. 'Hey, Good morning beautiful, do you happen to have the Geneva Convention Memorised? I need it for... something'. If only my amusement wouldn't leak through the link quite so clearly it would be a great prank. Might want to pick someone else for it though. Not sure I could bring myself to actually try to scare Lily much.*

Kat started to laugh and kick at the sand... and found her neat little metal trick with the fire got it to stick not just to the sand... but in mid-air as well. *Oh ho. This could be really interesting. I wonder if it will stay that way once I stop controlling it? I know it wouldn't before... but maybe?*

Kat willed a circle of fire to blaze into existence and then sprinted away while maintaining eye contact with it. Even when she felt it leave her control the fire remained in place. It kept burning around a minute before it died out. Kat wasn't surprised, she hadn't given it all that much energy anyway, so the fact it lasted a minute was actually a pretty sizeable period of time.

Kat felt a spark of interest ignite in her mind. *It seems I've got a very interesting little technique to practice. I now know what I'm going to do until Lily wakes up.*

Occasionally missing content, please report errors in time.

[Chapter 1233 1233 Thyme To Fly](#)

*Breakfast was a simple affair. Lily didn't wake up until it was nearly time to meet with Thyme, so it was a bit rushed. Kat just grabbed a piece of fruit that looked like an apple and tasted like strawberry to chew on, while Lily grabbed a few cuts of cooked meat and quickly ate those. While that was happening, Kat slipped over to Marigold and said, "Hey... so Asteodia seems to have... an issue with punishing herself for things that really aren't her fault so I was hoping you could help with that,"

Now, Kat was trying to be somewhat circumspect, but Marigold was raised a princess, and had at least some political training. Kat's awkward request gave her everything she needed to know about the situation. Marigold heard something more like "Asteodia has been punishing herself for the minor screw-up yesterday and I'm worried that she's taking things much too far. I wasn't able to help though, because it is probably related to deep-seated parental trauma and I was hoping, that you, as a sexy, beautiful, stunning masochist that isn't afraid to announce yourself as such, could help Asteodia become more enlightened about her repressed sexual desires,"

Of course, Marigold might have added a few mental embellishments to Kat's request but well... Kat did come to HER for to request help, and the demon clearly knew enough about Marigold's personality that the results wouldn't be a great surprise. Marigold smiled and nodded, accepting the request of course. It would certainly be an interesting little project for today considering she wouldn't be participating. *nOVelnext.Com*

After that, it was already time to head off to get ready for the first task. Kat had spent the night and early morning practicing her new technique and was quite confident she had it down. Of course, she hadn't thought of more exotic uses of it, such as burning space or time, but she was doing pretty well, and burning those two concepts was probably beyond a Rank 3 demon anyway.

Thyme was once again, standing on a stage right in front of the inn. Once everyone was there, Thyme clicked their fingers and suddenly they were floating in the air once again. Apparently the floating platform from yesterday had been a brief taste of what was to come. This platform was a bit more visible, looking more like glass then... well nothing. In the corners were large balloons about the size of cars. They obviously weren't keeping the platform afloat, but they did do to the atmosphere.

Thyme was wearing a colourful pinstripe suit that was a literal rainbow of colours, from red to violet. On top of Thyme's head was a large propellor hat with a similarly colourful design, though it wasn't following just the colours of a rainbow in this case, it had far too many shades, alongside black and white as well for good measure.

Unlike the normally at least somewhat thin bodies Thyme normally used, this one was big and round. Not fat, but round. Thyme looked more like a ball with arms and legs than a person, and that was probably the part of the point. Thyme's shoes were big bulbous things that looked like balloons had been crystalised. The white gloves were just a nice touch, though Thyme's pants were just a basic black. Still, the whole ensemble was certainly striking.

"Welcome, to one and all. Today, as you might have guessed, we'll be having a bit of an ariel theme. Now, to all your mages that might be upset at the limited use of magic so far, let me just say that magic is not restricted in ANY of the events we'll be having today. So get your mana pools ready for a workout.

"Of course, for our dear fighters in the audience, you might be feeling left out. Let it be known that it IS NOT SO. No, I shall be providing everyone somewhat suitable tools and enchantments for each event. They might not be perfectly matched to the situation, but they have their own benefits. Mostly.

"You may also realise that I have yet to ask for who is participating in which event. That's intentional. Today, I'll be giving you a brief description of all three events, and then you can sign up as each event starts. So now pressure to get the full lineup decided now, even if that might give you some benefits.

"Now... on to the bad news. At least, for two of the teams here. Kat, Lily and Romilda. You three have been banned from today's events, entirely due to the fact that you can all fly. Of course, Marigold, Kress, Borgick, March, Stan and Blue aren't allowed to participate either because they participated in events for three days in a row, but that's another matter really. Now, due to Romilda being banned from the events of today, Borgick may participate in one event in her place...I think you should take a look at

"However not so for Kat and Lily. This is because Kat participated two days in a row, and thus wouldn't be eligible to participate today regardless of the fact that they were banned from the events. That means, by extension, Kress definitely won't be participating. So it will be up to Gareth, Green and Nixilei to carry the day on that team. Now, are there any questions before I explain the events? Any decisions to contest?"

Nobody spoke up. Thyme had mentioned all of this before, so it didn't come as a surprise. Kat, and many others, were assuming that Thyme just wanted to make sure everyone was on the same page and was reiterating things in case they were forgotten. In truth, this was not the case. Mint, Titania and Ulf were all sitting in the basement back at the inn watching an illusion of the scene play out and the two royals needed to be caught up on things. So this was the best way to do it.

"Hey, can you tell us what the current scores are?" asked Marigold.

"Sure, I can do that. Current scores are, four and a half points for your team Marigold, with two and a half of those points being yours, one for Burnice, and one for Mauve," Thyme then turned to face Nell's team, "Next we have team B. Blue has gained almost of your points, and she's done really well in getting the too. You've got a whopping FIVE points to your name, just from Blue's efforts alone. Even if, two of them were from the sand castle round with Kress. Still, that sandcastle round gave you a lot because Ellenell came second there, giving you three points just from that round alone,

"Following on from that. We've got Team D2, they've got three points. Which isn't the highest score, but Willow has earned one, Burgandy has earned one and Stan has earned one. Which is a nice even spread amongst the team for those points. Really, good job Team D2. You're doing well.

"I'll skip D1 and move to team D3, or DW. Tis a very sad day for them really for they don't have any points yet. Shame. Now onto team, D1, they are number 1 right now. They've gained a whole eight and a half points. Four from Kat, Four from Kress and half a point from Gareth. They are just destroying this competition so far...

"But today will see Kat and Kress BOTH be sitting out today. With their two star players sitting on the bench will they be able to bask in the glory as continual winners? Or will they be dragged down into second place by one of the runner-up teams? Perhaps today Romilda's team will get a full sweep and rocket all the way... to second place? It could happen,"

*Well that's a bit of a rude way of looking at things. Not wrong... but I bit rude. I had thought that all the teams at least had one point though? Right? Hmm... Romilda didn't do well in Table tennis.... Borgick lost at dodgeball. Cyan got forced off the board really quickly in Twister. Everyone got dominated by Blue in volleyball. Asteodia... well we already know how she took her mistake in the log chopping contest, and they didn't do too badly in the sand castle one. Right? Borgick and Carl had a good time at least... probably.

So ok that's a bit of a bust. I'm a bit surprised at how well Blue's team is doing. Marigold's team has more 'finishing places' but having two wins just for Blue really does add up in terms of points. Though I hadn't realised just how well we were doing as a team. Is that bad of me not to notice?

Kress especially, has really come into his own this time. He's mellowed out, then he took the table tennis by storm, and really, the sand castle contest was made for him. If he lost that one, or even came second I feel like he would've been pissed. Though that's a fair reaction considering how good his sand castle building skills are.*

[Chapter 1234 1234 Explanations Come In Three](#)

Thyme smiled at the crowd, showing off their white teeth that seemed to squish slightly in the mouth.

Thyme is really going for this balloon theme. "Right, seems like there's no other questions so far. Let's move onto the events. For this first event, I'll keep the description extremely brief because we'll be coming back to it swiftly for a full explanation soon. The goal of the first event is to fall through a series of glowing rings as quickly as possible. There will be three courses, and you get one practice jump, exactly once, not once per course."

I think I could probably have participated in that one without an unfair advantage right? Falling is faster than flying surely?

[Perhaps, but I imagine that it's not a straight shot down. Part of the challenge is probably working out how fast you can fall while still keeping horizontal movement in mind. Thyme isn't going to just have these rings all in straight line. Plus, Thyme said previously that there would be equipment provided. Your wings probably negate, or do the jobs of said equipment.]

Hmm... maybe. I'm not exactly mad about this. And we did use it to our advantage to have me participate in day one and two with almost no downside. Admittedly, we didn't think Thyme would give Romilda's team a pass to use someone an extra time... but I'm not sure it matters.

[I'm not sure anything they do at this point matters]

Rude. It's not even completely true either. I'm sure that they have a chance to catch up if they do well.

[I'm betting the last day is underwater. Both Blue and you can sweep any of those you choose. Blue for being a water mage, and you because you can hold your breath a long time.]

Time might provide something for that though. And hey, we don't know if Stan can hold his breath for any longer than a human or elf can.

[Guess we'll just have to see]

"The second event, will be based on both duration, and distance. I'll be providing everyone participating in this event a choice of contraptions. Once chosen, everyone will kick off into the air. You will win the round by staying in the air for the longest amount of time, but, learning from my previous mistakes, I'll be implementing a two hour time limit.

"If multiple people make it all the way to two-hours without landing then I'll instead take the distance travelled into account. This distance will be calculated not based on distance flown in total, but by your distance away from the starting platform. Doesn't matter what direction you go, just that it's further away from the platform.

"Unlike in the first event, you WILL be able to attack each other, but said attacks will be limited based on the equipment you've chosen. No using magic or your own weapons against each other. Though, do keep in mind, many of your options for attacking people will include enchanted objects that drain mana. More details will be available later."

Oh wow. Yeah I'd destroy that event. So would Romilda probably. Being able to fly, and fly quickly, is definitely something I can do. Even if I have the restrictor band on.

[Yeah no way either of us could participate in this one. Even if I don't have the same ariel speed you do, I have stamina to glide around for two hours and make it a good distance away.]

"The final event will be a mid-air obstacle course. It'll be no-holds barred. Everything is allowed. If you fall off the obstacle course, you'll be teleported back to the last 'safe-point' a concept I'll explain later. The same will also happen if you go unconscious or take a serious wound I judge you unable to recover from in ten minutes. The various obstacles contain both boons and banes for people engaging with them.

"Perhaps you'll wonder off-course and find a teleportation item? Maybe if you rush ahead you can find a way to drop a wall down and stop your opponents from advancing? If you see a safe-point perhaps you'll use it to have a place to return... or you might try to destroy it so nobody can make use of it, including yourself.

"Now, the main theme of the course will be that it's all built of floating platforms of various sizes, mostly smaller ones. So falling is a very expected part of the course. You'll also be quite far from the ocean, which you'll need to be a moment away from hitting to return to the course. This is part of the penalty for falling off the course. I think you should take a look at

"One final note, is that the course was designed to be just barely impossible for a Rank 0 mortal, and reasonably completable for a skilled Rank 1 individual. Obviously this is a time based challenge, and you're all at least Rank 2, so I expect you to get creative, push your limits and try to make it through as quickly as possible,"

I kinda wish I could've participated in that one. Even if I know why I can't, that challenge seems really fun.*NoveL*Next.c*OM*

[It also seems surprisingly militant. I'm surprised Thyme would have an obstacle course considering this is meant to be a 'fun and casual round of the tournament'.]

That's... an interesting point. I guess the fact that you can 'respawn' essentially is what makes it more casual? Are the traps all going to be silly? Is this going to be Thyme's version of Wipeout or something?

[Huh... yeah I can see that actually. I can already imagine what it might look like, and I agree that it sounds fun. In fact, it sounds so fun that I think we should ask Thyme if they'll leave the obstacle course up for us after the event is over.]

Good idea I like love thinking. Kat purred the last two words in her mind, trying to make them as sensual as possible. Based on the wave of embarrassment she was getting back from Lily, Kat was pretty sure she succeeded.

While Kat and Lily were messing around, Thyme paused their speech, and pretended to get a drink. Pretended being the operative word because Thyme was only just barely disguising the fact the water was being thrown behind them instead of going in their mouth. The fact you could now see a puddle of water at Thyme's feet only reinforcing it. Kat... didn't get the joke. Neither did anyone else watching, including those in the basement.

"Right. That's the basic overview of it all, do you have any questions? Do keep in mind, I'm still holding back quite a few specifics for the day, and those will be explained to you before the relevant challenges. The first challenge especially. In fact, I'll just make it a rule. No questions about the first challenge. I'll answer those questions after I explain the specifics of that one later," said Thyme.

[Kat we gotta ask]

Why don't you ask?

[I'm a cat at the moment.]

Kat rolled her eyes. It would take Lily less than a second to transform but Kat didn't really mind so she put her hand up to indicate she had a question, and Thyme waved in her direction. "Will you be leaving the obstacle course up after using it later today so that it can be run again? It sounds quite fun. Lily and I would love to take a crack at it, even if we do understand why we can't during the tournament itself,"

Thyme pulled at their chin, letting their face stretch out like it was a beard before letting go and having it snap back into place. "Sounds interesting. I hadn't planned on leaving it up and running but if you're interested in having a go I'm happy to reset it after the official round is over. I'll have to leave a way to access it somewhere... but I'll just use one of the spare rooms in the inn. You can ask Mint about it later,"

Kat nodded in acceptance as Thyme turned to the rest of the crowd. As Kat did her own look around, she met March's eyes who flexed a bit in her direction with a grin, and a thumbs up, followed by miming at running. Kat was pretty sure that meant March wanted to run the obstacle course as well, so Kat sent back a nod and her own thumbs up of acceptance. This made March grin wider, so Kat was probably correct in her guess.

Marigold, seeing this interaction just straight up said aloud, "Sign me up for that run as well, it sounds super fun," Kat nodded at Marigold, not wanting to speak aloud herself when Thyme was trying to field questions. Still, she was looking forward to the end of the day. *Should we skip out on watching the final round of the day so we're surprised when we do our run?*

[Nah. Marigold and March should be watching as well, so they'll know some of the tricks like we will. It might even make the round more interesting, if say, everyone knows where the safe points are.]

[Chapter 1235 1235 First Flight Thyme Addition](#)

"Well it seems nobody has any other questions," said Thyme as they scanned the crowd carefully.

"Perhaps you'll have some after I explain the first task in detail. As I've already explained, the task in question will revolve around making your way through glowing rings as fast as possible.

"These rings will, for the most part, be in sequence and lower down as you go. Missing a ring will incur a thirty second time penalty for you. Considering I expect that each round will only be a few minutes at absolute most, this is a significant amount of time. One should strive to hit every ring if possible.

"For your final time, I will take the sum total of each of your jumps, add them together with penalties included, and then you will be ranked accordingly. The fastest time will get their two points, and the runner up will get one. I'm sure that's entirely as expected. Now for how things are going to be mixed up.

"Every contestant in this round will be provided a pair of gloves. They take in mana, and output a large burst of air. Each glove works independently of each other, and I have intentionally made horribly inefficient. Each use of the gloves will drastically cut into your mana reserves. For some people here, it might even be half your mana pool per use.

"Unlike in previous contests, I will NOT be restoring your mana between rounds. You will all draw lots at the beginning of the round to determine your order and it will stay that way for the entire duration of this challenge. It will be up to you to ensure that you pace yourself sufficiently.

"If you pass out due to mana loss I will NOT be healing you or restoring your mana. If you are unconscious when it is your turn to jump and start the ring course, I will simply throw you from the platform and score you based on how well your falling body does. Obviously, I'll ensure nobody comes to permanent harm, but it will effect your score at the end. Additionally, as should be obvious, you can't use normal magic for this round, just the gloves.

"That 'no spells' thing includes during and between rounds, there will be no attacking each other at all. If I see contestants making a nuisance of themselves the contestants in question will be placed in a black box, with no sound going in or out. That means they'll miss the preview of the next set of rings, and that will likely interfere with your ability to score highly. Still, perhaps you think it will be worth interrupting someone else's meditation. I've told you the rule, take it as you will.

"Ah, one final thing. The last ring in the sequence will be quite obvious. It will look like it's made of wood and held up by balloons much like the platform you're all on now. It is not actually made from balloons,

it's just an illusion. So Kat won't be able to see it, but she can't participate so it doesn't really matter. Now are there any questions?"

Marigold was instantly raising her hand. Thyme looked at Marigold's face. Then her hand... then deliberately turned away to Romilda who also had her hand raised and said, "Go ahead Romilda, what's your question?" Marigold just rolled her eyes at the childish display, knowing it was probably a minor punishment for yelling out earlier when she challenged Kat and March to a fight. Lily as well, but she didn't realise that yet.

"Do you have to wear those gloves on your hands?" asked the dwarf.

Thyme shrugged and said, "Well they're gloves, and they're designed to resize to fit hands. If you want to try putting them on your feet or whatever then be prepared to for a few broken bones. I made sure the enchanting on these is pretty bad so that they'd drain more mana than they should, if it was all done well. So... if the resizing freaks out because it's not on a hand? Well... no healing until after the event is over unless it's life threatening. So... use at your own risk?" Romilda accepted the answer, and Thyme turned to Marigold, "Marigold what's your question?"

"How... 'in the circle' do you need to be for it to count as passing through the ring?" asked Marigold.

Thyme nodded in understanding, "A good question. You need to have at least fifty percent of your body within the ring's circumference. Body parts that are within the glow of the light will count. I suppose I'll also mention that the rings will pulse slightly before disappearing to show they've been successfully claimed. Not that I suggest you look backwards to confirm as much, but it's useful for those watching," *Now* ~~El~~ *next*. ~~Om~~

It was Asteodia who raised a hand next and Thyme pointed a finger at her that extended far enough to give Asteodia a light tap on the nose. She got the picture and asked, "Is there any additional penalty for missing the final ring?"

Thyme nodded and said, "Yes actually, now that you mention it. Technically your 'fall' isn't over until you've claimed the last ring. It's about three times the size of a normal ring, and it should be rather hard to miss unless you're intentionally aiming for something like that... but technically speaking, as I said before, your 'fall' isn't over till you've been through the ring because that's what triggers the stop on the timer," "I think you should take a look at

Thyme paused to scratch at their chin for a few moments before continuing, "Hmm... that leaves the question of what I should be doing if the contestants passes the ring and can't get back up. I suppose technically the blast from the gloves... might be able to do it? No I don't think it quite has the power to make it to the ring at the end of every course. Two of them... probably, but definitely not for the third. Right, if you touch the water, I'll teleport you back to the start of the course. So... don't miss the final ring. It's massive, and really hard to miss but if you do, that's probably your chance at winning gone,"

That seems fair to me. If the ring is really as large as Thyme claims then missing it sounds like it would be your fault, not Thyme's.

[Yeah it does sound like that. Even if the second-to-last ring is off to the side, the final ring seems large enough that it won't matter.]

Bonas had a question, and Thyme called them out on it. "I'm wondering, you said that the gloves are independent of each other, but can you trigger them at the same time?"

Thyme made a 'so-so' gesture and explained, "The enchantment doesn't have anything that would stop you from activating them both at the same time... but unlike a lot of glove sets it also doesn't have anything to help line the activations up either. So activating them at the same time will be an entirely manual process. So... can you? Yes. Do I expect it to be easy? No,"

Blue's hand shot up and Thyme motioned for her to go on, "Does that mean you can't use the mana priming trick?"

Thyme nodded and said, "Yes. I did say these enchantments were intentionally poorly designed. Any hint of pushing your mana towards the gloves and they will suck the mana right out of you. They'll act more like a Funnel Beetle than a proper enchantment. It is messy, and perhaps slightly uncomfortable. I have checked them to ensure no damage to your mana pathways will occur... but that's the best I'm offering. Part of the appeal of the challenge is just how hard these gloves are going to be to work with.

"You can get all the rings by slowing down, spreading your arms out, and gliding around... for the most part. Some in the final round might be a bit trick. Alternatively... you can go full speed and use the gloves to push you there. It's not meant to be easy, it's meant to be a risk you can take. Hopefully it adds to the experience overall,"

After hearing Thyme's... expressive explanation about the gloves, Nixilei raised her hand and when given permission, asked, "Are these gloves likely to explode? I know you said the enchantment was bad... but how likely are they to just take off a contestants hands?"

Thyme waved the question away and said, "Not very likely at all. They are poorly enchanted, yes, but they aren't unstable. Think of it like... hmm... ah I know. Think of it like a poorly made plumbing system that loops around the house multiple times. Mana has to travel around that awkward pathway, losing bits and pieces as it tries to go from one side to the other. That is instead of the pathways intersecting and letting the mana ram into each other and explode. Does that make sense? Well, even if it doesn't I can promise you no explosions are likely... unless the contestants damage the gloves, but that's the same with most enchantments really."

"Wait... broken enchantments explode?" Kat whispered to Green, mostly because Green was the closest.

"Ah... not if you don't actually use them?" Green whispered back. "Thyme is making it seem easier to do than it is. And it's not a large explosion... it's just... right on your body a lot of the time which is where the problems come in. You'd probably be fine anyway,"

That's not exactly what I wanted to hear... but I suppose it's like a faulty battery? Maybe? I'm just guessing here really.

[Chapter 1236 1236 Taking The Fall](#)

No more questions were forthcoming so Thyme clapped their hands once more to bring the attention back to them. "Now that you've had your questions answered, I will provide you all with up to half an hour to make your decision as to who is going to take this challenge. While you don't have to decide

everything right now, I do recommend you have a rough outline of who is doing what for the entire day. Of course, I just need the next competitor, so technically you don't have to..."

Thyme let their sentence trail off and then snapped their fingers. Kat and co found themselves in a little room with a table off to the side. It had a pitcher of water on it and a bowl of candies. The room itself was really just a box with windows otherwise. Kat took a glance out of one of them and confirmed they were still in the air. *Probably just keeping with theme... but why does Thyme have so many rooms that can just be floated around? I know they aren't illusions, and neither is the sky outside... but I just can't work out why you'd need this.*

[Huh... that's actually a good question. I could see a more normal person just having the room be underground with an illusion of the sky... unless the room IS underground but the windows are using spatial manipulation techniques to still show the sky outside instead? I don't really know how your eyes would react to something like that. I mean, it'd be the real sky and possibly 'really there' by some definitions.]

Huh... yeah... might be something to test when you unlock your spatial affinity.

Kat and Lily were pulled out of their reverie when everyone else moved to sit down. Kat moved to do the same, and soon everyone was seated. Gareth poured a glass of water for himself and Green then looked around the room. Kat gave a shrug, Kress shook his head, and Nixilei made to grab the pitcher herself. Gareth allowed this and soon three members at the table had glasses of water.

Green downed hers quickly and then dropped onto Gareth, enjoying the fact he wasn't wearing his armour. He was much more comfortable to sleep on like this. That is... until she heard Nixilei loudly clearing her throat. "What?" mumbled Green.

"Considering you'll have to participate in something today I feel like you should be involved in the discussion Green," said Nixilei firmly.

"Eh, I can just do whatever you assign me to," said Green. "That way I can sleep more,"

Nixilei let out a long, pained sigh. "Green, you just woke up. You don't need to sleep more, we all need to plan,"

"Yeah but I went to bed late. It's not even my fault!" insisted Green.

"Green, you fell asleep instead of talking to Auctifer. You did not go to bed late," shot back Nixilei.

Green however, denied this, "Nope, that doesn't count. I wasn't actually IN bed. I didn't say anything about sleeping more or less, I said I went to bed late. Those are two completely separate issues,"

Nixilei let out another long sigh as she rubbed her temples exaggeratedly. Kress, keen to stir the pot a bit said, "Well considering I'm not going to participating either way AND I've earnt us four whole points... I'm going to stay out of the conversation and take my own nap," Kress then fell forward planting his face on the table and pretending to snore.

"See, if Kress can sleep so can I!" insisted Green.

Nixilei really wanted to point out that, A, Kress wasn't asleep and B, Kress did have a point. He didn't need to be involved in the discussion. Technically speaking. Nixilei was also a bit biased in that she didn't

value Kress' opinion much in the coming discussion. Especially not if he was going to try and cause trouble like right now. "Green, he has a good excuse," lied Nixilei. It was the best argument she was getting on short notice.

Should we like... do something about this?

[Do what exactly? They're not shouting, and Nixilei is more exasperated then anything. Plus, it's pretty obvious what everyone is going to do anyway. Green will be assigned the obstacle course because she did one back in the first tournament round and has wind affinity to help get across and stay on the platforms. Plus she might be better at open combat.]

[Then Nixilei will have to take the second task, because she has more mana then Gareth and better control over said mana. That will probably be necessary for keeping herself up in the air longer, and maybe going further. Green MIGHT be better for the challenge with her wind affinity, but I imagine time wouldn't make wind too strong for today, otherwise he'd have sat them all out like he did us.]

[Which leaves Gareth to try and win the first challenge. He's... probably more of a sacrificial lamb sadly. We don't have anyone else to send, and I don't know if he's got enough mana to make good use of the gloves. I think the best we can expect from him is a second place, even if I've got no idea who's likely to win.]

Wouldn't it be better to send Gareth to the obstacle course then?

I think you should take a look at

[I doubt it. How much mana does Green actually have?]

I... I don't really know? I'd imagine she has a decent amount... but perhaps not? Would the fact that she sleeps a lot be a help or a hinderence to her mana pool?

[No idea... but now that you mention it... if she sleeps between rounds it might let her mana regenerate more? Is that how that works?]

Aren't you the mage? Shouldn't you know?

[Well I've always got full mana after taking a nap... but I don't think I've ever been empty of mana AND then taken a short nap afterwards. Unless you count that one time I completely drained myself, but I think that slows your mana regeneration down as you recover properly, so it probably doesn't count.]

Probably. So... Gareth, Nixilei then Green?

[Probably.]

"Shouldn't this be expected from me at this point though?" offered Green. "Surely you've planned around my desire to sleep?"

Nixilei just sighed for a few moments before taking a long sip of water. "Green, I know this is pretty normal behaviour for you, and yes, technically, I've got a plan in case you were asleep but I DO want this to be a discussion, not just me throwing ideas at you besides, you can sleep when it isn't your event,"

"Fine," mumbled Green as she moved to sit in Gareth's lap.

"Ok then," said Nixilei choosing not to comment on that. "I suppose I should first ask, does anyone have an event they want in particular?"

"Honestly, all of them sound exhausting," said Green.

Nixilei ignored the quip and looked to Gareth who shrugged. "I'll take whatever challenge you want me to. I don't think I'm well suited to any of them honestly. Pick the two that are best for you and Green and be prepared to lose when it comes my turn,"

"Bit of a downer attitude Gareth... but I don't disagree," said Nixilei.

Gareth shrugged and said, "Just trying to be realistic about it. I don't the mana you two do, and I've certainly got no experience trying to fly, or falling from great heights. Heck, the only thing I DO have experience with is obstacle courses but Green has been in one of Thyme's obstacle courses before... and the maze too now that I think about it. So probably best she does that one,"

Nixilei looked to Green who just yawned at Gareth's suggestion but didn't refute it. She did want to win the tournament as well, and it was a good idea. Perhaps the most tiring one, but she didn't know that for sure, and even if it was, she would only have complained superficially.

"Right... so I guess it's down to me and Gareth to go for distance or speed," said Nixilei. Gareth just shrugged again, giving Green a little peck on the cheek as he did so. "In that case... I think it's best that I take the second task. Hopefully my mana control will be more useful there. I know I have the bigger pool, but that would be useful for both challenges from the looks of things. Unless... you think otherwise?"

"No... I think you're probably correct," said Gareth. "I'm just not sure how well I can do here. I'll try of course, but I don't know if I'll have the mana to use the gloves enough. I don't think I'm one of the people that could only use the damned things twice... but I might be. I don't really know how I measure up compared to Kress or the average... not in a long time. Plus, everyone that's made it this far is at least a little above average in the mana department surely,"

"We'll just have to see how it goes," agreed Nixilei with another sigh. She was doing that a lot.

[Chapter 1237 1237 Taking The Fall 2 Guest Edition](#)

--Nell--Bonas--Nabras--Ellenell--Blue

Blue looked at the table, the pitcher of water and the sweets for a second before swiping a handful of the sweets stating, "I'm not involved today. I did my work for the team yesterday, goodnight," and collapsing onto the ground. "Ow"

"See, that's what you get for being silly," said Nell.

"Worth it," said Blue around the candy. Well it sounded more like 'mrth it' but everyone in the room got the idea.

Nell just shook her head and poured herself a glass, "Fine, Blue can rest if she wants. She IS the big points winner for us and yesterday was a lot of work for her. If I'd known how much effort she'd need to

put into things I would've done things differently, maybe had someone else take her place in the Twister contest,"

Ellenell laughed, "That's not what wore her out and you know it. It was just a big day for her, and she stayed up late chatting with Ulf, I mean, 'Steve' of course,"

Nabras rolled his eyes, "Nobody believes that he's actually some random farmer. Even if he's not Ulf, I refuse to believe his name is STEVE of all things. That man has seen some shit, and Steve is a relatively new name, so I doubt it's his real one,"

Bonas was about to chime in when Nell cut in instead, "Look, as fascinating as that all is, we need to discuss what we're doing for the day. Blue is out, obviously, and Ellenell is our major player for today, what with his mana capacity. I feel like I should also participate, and perhaps Nabras with me. That will give us the most options come day 4,"

Ellenell shrugged and said, "I can participate in whatever challenges you desire but I suspect I would be little more than dead weight on the obstacle course,"

"Yeah, his old bones wouldn't be able to keep up. That's why I should do it," claimed Nabras, ignoring the fact that Nell had, lightly, implied that he shouldn't participate today. Her reason was a good one... even if not the whole truth. Nabras wasn't taking things seriously, not after they made it back in. Perhaps he was assuming there would be a third chance?

Bonas sighed at her brother and said, "I'm easy. I'll happily take over a task, or sit the day out. It doesn't bother me,"

Nell thought on the suggestion for a moment. "I'm thinking myself for the obstacle course, Ellenell for the second task, just have him run away from everyone else. It's just distance and time that matter, and he should be good enough to avoid people... so which of you two wants to plummet from a great height?" finished Nell as she looked between the two wolves.

--March--Burgandy--Willow--Chartreuse—Stan

March let out a long sigh of disappointment. "Today looks like such fun, I am saddened that I participated two days in a row,"

Chartreuse patted March's large arm in consolation, "Aw don't worry, you've got that challenge with Kat and Marigold later, so that's going to be something at least,"

March perked back up at that, and nodded in agreement, "Yes, you're right. I shouldn't feel bad that I missed a chance to run the gauntlet officially when my challenge will come later this afternoon,"

Willow and Burgandy just took a seat, Stan was somehow, already in one. Eventually March and Chartreuse made their way to the table as well. March took a handful of the candy and started to crunch on it, causing most of the others to wince. "Um... March I'm pretty sure you're meant to suck on those," offered Burgandy.

March shrugged and said, "I know, but this is a good workout for my jaw muscles. Sure you can train all the time, but to truly make training a lifestyle you have to incorporate training into the little things, like eating,"

"Don't pass this off as training," grumbled Burgandy, "You just eat candy like a fucking lunatic,"

March shrugged, unconcerned by the accusation. Before this could get out of hand, Willow pulled everyone's focus back in, "Ok guys, we've got time to decide who's doing what, and a fair bit of it. March and Stan can't participate, obviously, so we've just got to decide who wants to do what. Does anybody have any requests?"

Chartreuse, in his usual quiet voice said, "I'm not interested in doing the obstacle course at all... I don't think I'd be that good with it. I don't really want to fight the others directly. I don't really want to do the first task either, but I understand I've got the mana for it, and I might be the best option. So if you all," Chartreuse looked over everyone except Stan, "think that it's best I take part in that one, I will,"

Willow looked at Burgandy who shrugged. Willow shrugged. Burgandy shrugged. Willow wiggled her eyebrows. Burgandy showed her teeth. Willow leaned back to look down at Burgandy. Burgandy raised an eyebrow.

"So it's decided, I'll do the drop, you do the obstacle course," said Willow firmly.

"Wait hang on, how did that nonsense decided anything?" retorted Burgandy.

"So you don't want to do the obstacle course?" asked Willow.

"Now I didn't say that..." replied Burgandy.

--Romilda--Cyan--Carl--Asteodia—Borgick

"I call the second task," said Asteodia. I think you should take a look at

"I call sitting out," said Borgick.

Carl and Cyan looked at each other. Carl shrugged.

"Well I've been banned for the day so just make up your mind between you two," said Romilda.

"Do you actually want to try any of these?" asked Cyan. Carl shrugged. "Well if you're going to be like I guess I'll take the first task. The obstacle course seems like such a hassle,"

"Plus, there's no Marigold," said Asteodia with a grin. Cyan slapped the back of the elf's head. He didn't need to deal with more jokes about that.

--Marigold--Vanya--Burnice--Midnight--Mauve

"BOOOO, why did I have to get banned from today! Everything looks awesome. Why oh why was I tempted by the previous challenges!" said Marigold as she collapsed into a chair and slammed her hands repeatedly on the table.

"You were too interested in the potential for sexual situations and jokes," answered Vanya dryly. "An excuse to bounce around in a swimsuit, and one to sexually harass people while disguising it as strategy was too much for you small bit of self-control to handle,"

Marigold rounded on Vanya, "Oh, lacking in self-control, am I? If my self-control is really that poor why don't I strip you naked and take you here? Right now? I've got nothing else to do!"

"Can you two horny shitheads save this for later?" asked Mauve. "We've got shit to plan, and I certainly don't want to watch the weird shit you pair get up to in the bedroom. I've already heard enough of it, seeing it would scar me for life,"

"Hey, I'm not that horny," retorted Vanya.

"Vanya, you currently aren't wearing any underwear, you've got no room to defend yourself," said Burnice.

"Oh, little Burnice is noticing Vanya's lack of underwear? Oh my oh my, what has the world come to," said Marigold with a laugh.

"No, I've noticed nothing new. I know this BECUASUE YOU TWO THREW VANYA'S BRA INTO MY BEDROOM WHILE I WAS SLEEPING! RIGHT ONTO MY FACE!" shouted Burnice back.

"Oh..." said Marigold. "That was your room... um... oops?" Marigold didn't look all that sorry, but she was a little bit. Hitting her face with it was a step too far, even if it was hilarious. Vanya for her part was bright red and looked rather mortified.

"Wait, how did you even open the door?" asked Midnight.

"I gave them both permission when they wanted to raid my closet the other day and didn't rescind it. Clearly that was a mistake," said Burnice with a sigh. Not all that angry really. She just wanted to blow off a bit of steam... plus it was a great opening provided by Marigold. Had to make use of those.

Mauve cut in, "Don't we have more serious things to discuss?"

"I'm always serious about sex," said Marigold. "And I don't like that you want to pretend otherwise,"

Mauve slapped Marigold across the face. Sure Marigold enjoyed it, if the bright smile she had when she sat back up was anything to go by, but it made Mauve feel better, so she felt it was worth it. "Focus. Who is going to do what? Marigold obviously is doing nothing, but what about the rest of us?"

"Midnight should probably take the first task," said Vanya. *nOw eINExt.cOm*

"I'm not disagreeing... but I had my eye on that one myself," said Mauve.

"Oh, not the obstacle course?" asked Vanya.

Mauve shrugged and said, "A little, but this first task seems particularly thrilling. Send Midnight to do the second, and then you or Burnice can do the third,"

"I wish to test myself against the obstacle course, but I am willing to wait until the bout with Kat, Marigold, and March to participate if you want to take the official run," said Vanya.

Burnice shrugged, "Either is fine with me,"

[Chapter 1238 1238 Practicing Fall](#)

It was almost time. This was rather obvious by the giant glowing numbers slowly counting down to zero. They'd started at the minute mark and were just about there. The group was standing, ready to leave... and Kress had just snatched up the candy bowl hadn't he? Gareth sighed, "Kress my friend, is that really necessary?"

Kress shrugged, "Well I'm not going to let free candy go to waste, and nobody else was eating it. So... I'm claiming it for myself,"

"And you're taking the bowl as well because...?" asked Gareth.

"Because I need something to put the candy in of course!" Kress returned with a smile. "Where else would I put it? Certainly not my pockets. Even if the clothes are clean, the fabric would just stick to the candy making a mess of things anyway. Plus, this bowl is made from wood, something Thyme has a near infinite amount of. Even if I wasn't planning to give it back, which I am, it really wouldn't matter,"

*Kress, your arguments, while compelling, aren't really getting at the heart of the issue. Why do you think it's appropriate to just walk out with the whole damn bowl? Sure nobody else was eating it, but that much candy cannot be good for you. I still remember that time you got into the honey jar and ate the whole thing, only to be throwing it all up not an hour later. Made worse when it started to stick in your throat. Nearly suffocated you idiot.

Though in the end, I guess I'm just not willing to say any of that aloud. Kress has been a lot better lately, not with me really but with everyone else. I'd hate to start picking on him and have him go back to being an ass to everyone that wasn't me, or one of the guards. At least he chose to do this on a day he wasn't competing. Heck, worse comes to worst he doesn't have to compete tomorrow either so it will be fine. Just... hopefully he doesn't look like too much of a slob.*

Then the timer hit zero, and the five of them stepped through. Lily didn't step, she was of course in Kat's arms. When Gareth saw the other side... he noticed that two of the other teams had ALSO taken the bowls of candy. Gareth didn't know if he should laugh or cry about that one. Heck, March was eating them like they were biscuits or something. Gareth felt his teeth hurting just looking at her. Marigold at least was sharing the candy around.

"Chosen competitors make you way forward please!" said Thyme in that weird suit. Gareth wasn't sure why Thyme looked like a ball either. Regardless of those questions, Gareth just gave Green a kiss before heading forward. He was accompanied by Nabras, Willow, Cyan and Mauve. He studied the competition for a few moments as he started to think. **nOvelnext.CoM**

Right. Nabras... might be someone I can beat. I didn't see how things went yesterday, but I heard it was a shoddy performance. Perhaps that same overconfidence will be his undoing? Or can he keep his ego in check now it's taken a beating. Willow... we haven't seen much from her and it's hard to guess at her mana capacity. I've never interacted with her much, as the second daughter of her house. Might have only seen her once before... maybe. Cyan and Mauve... well Mauve looks to be much happier than Cyan... but I think Cyan is a mage? I suppose those two will be the main competition then? I'll have to see what they do.

Once Thyme had all five of them nearby, he tapped the ground and platforms rose from the ground in front of them all. It was a pair of gloves with a very clear circle in the centre of the palms where the wind was almost certainly going to be expelled from. Gareth pulled them on and felt them constrict to match his hands. Giving them a quick flex he found the give in them was fairly generous. Better than his own metal gauntlets that's for sure. I think you should take a look at

"Now, you've all got your gloves and they seem to fit. That's not really a surprise but it does pay to make sure. Now, in a moment I'll send you all off to your own practice areas. You get one dive attempt, but it will be a little different from the standard runs. Firstly, the runs that actually count will all be made from the same location. You can watch what your competitors do on the way down for hints as they go.

"Additionally, in the normal rounds there will only be one colour of rings, but in the practice run I've thrown a whole bunch of them out there. Go for just one colour, or try to collect as many as you can, I don't really care. It's just to get you used to falling, to moving in the air, and to using the gloves. At the end of the practice jump, or if you haven't started but all four of your competitors have finished, I'll be pulling you back here and restoring your mana for the real thing. Are there any questions?"

I don't think so. Everything was clear before and I think all the questions have been asked. Gareth seemingly wasn't the only one to think this, because nobody else came forward with questions either. With a nod, Thyme snapped their fingers and suddenly Gareth was gone. Then just as suddenly he could feel the wind whipping around him. Gareth took stock.

He was in the middle of the air standing on what looked like a single plank of wood, surrounded by nothing else. The fact his toes were still 'on the ground' despite being off the wood showed that his platform was a bit safer than it appeared... but perhaps only a bit. The wind itself could be a problem, he was already shivering just from standing here in place. Still, he had to get his bearings and... look down.

Now Gareth wasn't afraid of heights. It wasn't a problem he had really. That didn't mean he was comfortable looking straight down. Gareth felt his stomach drop out from under him and his legs start to shake as he properly took in his fall. There a whole host of glowing rings splattered about in a downwards spiral that ended at the water... the water that was just... so far down.

Well shit. I think I know what Thyme specified that if one person was just standing on their platform not moving, they'd still call the round. This is... something. Even as unafraid of heights as I normally claim to be... I can feel my heart pounding, and my mind telling me not to jump. I know I can. I am not so slaved to my sense of fear that it could stop me... but it is not a comforting drop either way.

Gareth calmed his heart as best he could then took in the rings proper. Thyme was right, there really did seem to be a whole host of colours down there. At first, the colours seemed to go in a slight circle, with the matching one underneath it only slightly offset. Well, until there was a large break and suddenly the rings were all spread out everywhere.

Are the rings just a trap? Isn't it better to use this practice to get more of a feel for how to move in the air? Then again, the rings do act as decent goals for trying to figure that part out. I guess I'll take the dive.

Before Gareth could talk himself out of it he jumped. Gareth felt his stomach cramp even as the air rushed past his ears. He didn't even have time to think about it properly before he was falling through

one of the rings. Cursing himself for panicking, he then started to move from side to side, trying to get a feel for it and found he really didn't move quickly at all. Hitting a few more rings essentially by accident as he fell.

Gareth then decided to aim for one of the outer rings, a red one that was rather obvious. With a grim look he pointed his arm away from him and triggered the enchantment. Suddenly a full quarter of his mana pool was ripped away from him. At the same time, it felt like his arm was nearly snapped in half from the knockback. He barely even had the presence of mind to keep going for the red ring. He managed it... barely.

What the hell was that! I know Thyme said some people could only use the damned things twice but they didn't mention anything about it nearly taking an arm off! I'm stronger than most and even I felt that. Probably a bit of an exaggeration... or maybe not? Do I need to hold whichever hand I fire against my chest or something to absorb the impact? And what the heck will I do with just four shots?

[Chapter 1239 1239 Gareth's Rising Heart](#)

Gareth chapter

Competitors: Nabras, Willow, Cyan, Mauve

Gareth was laying down, flat on his back, heartbeat going a mile a minute. He struggled, but eventually managed to get his breathing back to a normal rhythm but the adrenaline and the fact the platform he'd been teleported to didn't look wide enough for him to remain on it wasn't helping matters.

Well. There you go. I've done my practice run but apparently the others haven't. I wonder who's waiting. At least two people have to be... unless someone is just in the fall. I... I don't even know how long that took. I certainly wasn't ready for the... last few moments of the fall. Thyme was right the final ring is impossible to accidentally miss but... gods the moment before hitting the water. Even knowing I'd be teleported I couldn't stop the thoughts of 'Oh God I'm dead' and now... now I don't know what to feel.

Physically, he was feeling a lot of shaking. Even with his breathing forcefully under control his legs were still shaking and his hands were much worse off. The fact his breathing was steady amongst all of it was only due to many, many hours of training, with perhaps regular live combat also helping to contribute.

*Oh it's just a short fall that won't even hurt you. It's not a dangerous beast or a trap filled ruin or a group of bandits that would really rather not be cut down. It's so much safer than all of those things... and yet... I don't think I've experienced such terror in many, many years. Gods I don't know if I've EVER experienced something like that at all. God I'm not sure how I'll be able to get my wits about me enough to regenerate my mana...

Shit wait. Do I need to do that? No... no this is the practice run so I think Thyme will restore it afterwards? God. I'm basically tapped out already. Testing one arm, the other arm, and both together. Yeah... note to self, both together is dangerous, but doable. Hurts more than it should perhaps? My arms don't feel broken.

Still, the mana thing. Really going to need that top-up because I'm basically out. I can't believe it. A Quarter of my mana for each shot. Well, not quite considering I've got a bit left in the tank but I feel the same soreness I would had I completely drained my mana so it's not like the little bit left is really helping me all that much is it?*

That's when Gareth heard the clinking of glass on something and turned to his side. There, sitting innocently on 'thin air' was a glass of glowing blue liquid with a few chunks of things in it. Gareth didn't hesitate he downed the thing instantly and the pain faded, his mana almost seemed to overfill for a second, then his body was fine. He wasn't even shaking anymore... nope never mind. Gareth could already feel the shaking coming back.

He let his head drift back down to the ground. For given word of ground anyway. *Right. That's nice. I'm not going to be exhausted for the real rounds... but damn what am I going to do about my mana? I think, depending on the courses, giving up a few rings is very necessary because I won't have the mana for anything more. I can, maybe, recover enough for two charges between rounds but honestly? I'll be lucky to manage even a quarter of my mana pool.*

Gareth winced as a brightly glowing series of numbers appeared in the sky above him. They were clearly counting down to zero from a minute. Again. *Shit. No real time to plan. Is there anything I can do to influence my chances of going last? Hopefully so... but I don't even know how Thyme is going to get everyone in order. Aw well. Are there any last second thoughts I need to have while I'm nicely hidden away?

I... I don't think so? I don't plan to do anything tricky with the gloves, no idea how to secure my place at the back of the line. Really, I'm not sure how to do anything at all that matters right this moment. So what just relax for another thirty seconds or so? It doesn't seem like I have any other options. Damn. I guess that's it then.*

Gareth tried to empty his mind and calm down as much as possible after that. It wasn't meditation, but it was something. Hopefully when it came time to jump it would help him keep his cool. If not... well... his head was only 'mostly' empty. What remained was Green's smiling face and just thinking about his fiancé did raise his mood a fair bit.

As the clock hit ten seconds, Gareth slowly pulled himself to his feet. There was no sense in relying on Thyme to put him back on his feet before he arrived at the other end of the teleportation. In fact, Gareth was pretty sure Thyme wouldn't bother. When the timer hit zero, this was confirmed. I think you should take a look at

Nabras and Cyan were both lain out on the floor still, while Gareth, Willow and Mauve were all still standing. Nabras noticed this, and quickly got up himself. Brushing his clothes down as if he'd tripped or something. Cyan looked around at everyone nearby, then over to Thyme, and seeing the dryad making no moves, just shrugged and stayed on the ground.

"Welcome back you five!" said Thyme with a grin and a slightly echoey voice. "Hopefully you've got your bearings from that little practice run. Now, we're going to decide who goes first. You'll be drawing straws! Whoever gets the longest straw will be going first!"

Thyme then pretended to pull some thin rope from a non-existent pocket in their pants before holding an arm out and waiting. Mauve and Willow moved first, practically at the same time. Each grabbing one of the offered bits of rope quickly and pulling it into their hands. Mauve quickly hid hers in her pocket.

While she was doing that, Nabras and Gareth both moved to pick up their ropes. Nabras' was noticeably longer, as he needed to pull quite a bit of rope out. It was about thirty centimetres in length. Gareth relaxed seeing this. Sweet, looks like I'm not going first!

Gareth however spoke too soon. As he pulled on his bit of rope there always seem to be more. Ten, twenty, thirty centimetres and it was clearly still going. Gareth sighed and kept pulling even as the rope changed. From a plain white rope, to one that was braided with rainbow string. Gareth growled, getting a touch annoyed as he pulled further. What he'd already 'grabbed' pooling at his feet as the rope he was yanking on started to have little flags tied to the ends.

Well this is just great. I suppose I spoke too soon when I said that I wasn't going first. Still this is getting silly. Why wasn't Willow's or Mauve's anywhere close to this long? At this point Gareth wasn't even trying to be subtle. He was using both hands and was just yanking the rope as much as he could with every pass trying to get the damned thing out.

Cyan had to get off the floor, mostly because if he'd stayed there he would've been buried under all the rope Gareth had suddenly acquired. With a shrug he pulled the rope... and found it to be exactly as long as it looked. Barely even the length of a finger. He was probably going last. Gareth glared at Cyan's hands for a few moments as his own rope KEPT COMING.

Calm. I am calm. Gareth breathed out deeply and quickly shifted to a regular breathing pattern as he got back to work. By the one minute mark though, he was getting a bit annoyed again. The area around he was covered in rope. Everyone else had one that was so much smaller there was no question he was going first, so he was left wondering what the point of this all was. So he asked, "Thyme... what... what am I even doing here? I mean, I get we're drawing straws... but obviously I've lost at this point right?"

Thyme nodded, "You raise a compelling argument. What if I said that if you pull out the whole length of rope you get to keep it?"

Gareth looked down at his pile of rope then to his hands, then to the rope again. I... I don't think that's a good deal? I mean... "Rope isn't exactly expensive and I'm pretty sure my team already has enough in storage rings if it really came down to it. Um... so can I go with 'I'm not interested'?"

Thyme nodded, "Yeah you can, I was just curious to see if any would call me out on... this," Thyme said as they waved at the rope on the floor.

"Right..." mumbled Gareth.

Thyme nodded again and suddenly the ropes around Gareth vanished. "As Gareth surmised, he is going first. Followed by Nabras, Willow, Mauve and Cyan in that order. Yes I know how long all the strings are, so hiding them really didn't do anything,"

*Guess I'll just have to give it my best.

[Chapter 1240 1240 First Jump](#)

Competitors: Gareth, Nabras, Willow, Mauve, Cyan

---- Gareth ----

Gareth peered over the edge at the course he was about to fall through and felt mixed emotions. The first jump seemed to be a straight shot. The rings were all lined up perfectly from top to bottom... with exactly one exception. About halfway through there was exactly one ring off to the side. Just, all by its lonesome.

Right, so I see the challenge here. You have to choose if it's worth going for that ring off to the side or not. It's going to cost my half of my mana just to make the attempt, and that's just for a single ring. If I need my full mana pool next round to catch two or more rings then I'm shit outta luck.

The counterpoint to that, is any mana I'm 'not regenerating' is essentially a sunk cost as well. I doubt I can regenerate my mana completely between rounds, so it's still a risk... but I might be best paying the mana now so I can restore some of it for later. Then again... maybe not? It's a gamble either way.

"Thyme... is it possible to see the next course ahead of time?" asked Gareth.

"Afraid not my dear Gareth. You can only see what's immediately ahead of you," answered Thyme with a grin. The fact that Thyme's little bowtie started spinning was probably not a coincidence.

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"Of course, why would I think otherwise," said Gareth with a sigh as he looked back at the drop. *So what's the choice? Do I take the risk? I... I think so. Might as well ensure I have a 'perfect' run to start off with. If it turns out I needed the mana later then that's that.* "Here I go!"

Gareth jumped off and angled himself quickly to streamline his body as much as possible, limiting surface area to reduce his drag. He was rocketing down through ring after ring and keeping himself as still as possible. He hadn't quite hit the centre with his jump, but with the rings in this configuration, moving around wasn't worth the loss of speed.

As he fell, Gareth kept an eye on the outlier ring without readying his mana or moving his hands just yet. As soon as he cleared the ring just prior to the one off to the side, Gareth flipped his hand around and fired. Wincing as his arm kicked into the side of his head. Still, it was enough to get him over the ring.

Gareth didn't waste time worrying about the pain, he just waited until the ring flashed, registering his passing, before activating his second glove and sending him back to the main column. Once again, it hurt, but he could deal with it. Especially when all he had to do was keep going straight all the way down to the bottom.

When Gareth cleared the final ring, Thyme said "Done. That's a time of two minutes, and fifty-three seconds, no penalties involved. Good show," *Is it? I guess we'll just have to see...* With that announcement Gareth dropped down onto his back and started to regulate his breathing and recover as much mana as he could.

---- Nabras ----

Nabras was hoping that nobody could notice his pounding heart. Apparently, diving straight off the platform without properly preparing himself had been a bad idea the first time around and now the thought of sending himself through it a second time was causing no shortage of anxiety.

Get it together man. It's just a short fall. Gareth was only falling for three minutes. You can survive that. You've fought monsters for longer. This looked fun just ten minutes ago. Or at least, it looked completely doable. Now you just need to go through this... three times more then you're done. Heck you might even get some points out of it.

Nabras peered over the edge to confirm the course. He'd seen the illusion of Gareth falling but that didn't really give you a great idea of the course itself. Perhaps that was a balancing act on Thyme's part.

Right, so it's a straight shot, you just need to get through the one ring on the side and back again. That should be easy. No problem. My arms can deal with that.

Nabras sucked in a deep breath and moved to the edge. Then he thrust his arms forward... and leaned backwards to keep himself from going over the edge. Shit. No just... just gotta do it. Nabras rolled his arms forward, back, forward, back, making it look like it was planned before eventually managing to gather his courage enough to go for it.

Nabras' arms spun through the air as he failed to get in position quickly. He tried to straighten out, but he was already too angled, and it started to move him away from the centre of the rings. Nabras tried, and failed to correct this, starting to spin around instead. Panicking, Nabras just flattened himself out completely for a bit before pulling his whole body into a ball and then straightening out once more. I think you should take a look at

Nabras was thankful he managed to situate himself so quickly because only a few moments later he was readjusting his glove and launching himself off to the side. Nabras grit his teeth through the pain and managed to swing back into the line of rings properly before letting his arms hang by his sides. Not perfect form, but they were sore and he felt the extra support worth it.

With that, it was a straight shot to the final ring then he was done Thyme teleported him back and said "A respectable three minutes and eleven seconds," Nabras let out a long breath before nodding at Thyme and sitting down on the ground. He was down forty percent of his mana, but that was fine... probably.

---- Willow ----

Willow, contrary to the other contestants, sat down on the edge and looked at the rings below, unlike the others who chose to stand. *Right. This seems like a warmup round. Though I wonder if this is a trick of some kind. Hmm... well... even if it is I've got more than enough mana to burn for a ring here. Especially in the first round.*

Willow spent a bit of extra time looking around for any tricks or traps but there didn't seem to be any. She was determined to keep an eye out for them just in case, but it seemed straightforward for the first round at least. With a shrug, Willow just pushed herself off the edge and fell. She quickly got into a divers pose, arms out front with her hands together and sped down as quickly as she could.

When she reached the point just before the odd ring out, she flipped a hand over, while bracing it with her other arm, and let the mana flow. Willow spun rapidly as she flew over towards the ring but was

able to keep her lunch down long enough to repeat the gesture and go back the other way. It even cancelled out most of her spin. Just one more flip and she was on a straight shot through to the finish.

Willow sped through the final goal and heard Thyme say, "What a show from the fastest contestant yet. Even with those arial manoeuvres she's still ended up with a very respectable two minutes and forty-seven seconds."

Willow sat down cross-legged to try to restore her mana a bit. She wasn't sure how important it was, she was only down twenty percent after all. Still, every bit of mana might count.

---- Mauve ----

Mauve wasted no time at all once she was up. Mauve took a running jump and leapt straight off the platform diving down without a care in the world. A manic grin was spread across her face as she shot downwards. Unlike every single other person so far, when she came upon the 'break' in the line of rings she didn't hesitate, she didn't prepare herself. She just kept, going, down.

By the time Mauve was passing through the final rings, she was cackling madly, her hair blowing behind her in the wind and just the biggest smile on her face. "Ooh, an interesting strategy. By far the fastest time here, Mauve managed to make it down to the bottom in only two minutes and twenty-eight seconds! Of course... that's not taking into account the penalty she received from flying directly down, so her final time is two minutes and fifty-eight seconds,"

Mauve just shrugged at that answer. Sure she was in it to wind... but damn that speed? That was a rather thrilling feeling.

---- Cyan ----

After Mauve's performance, Cyan's was rather standard. Cyan made the jump, flew through the rings, and burnt some mana to ensure that he got all of them on the way down. The only real difference was that he didn't handle the recoil well.

He wasn't properly prepared for it. His hand had smacked him right on the nose, blurring his eyesight and almost causing him to miss the 'return-trip' with the second gauntlet. He was lucky it was just a straight shot because he could hardly see through the tears.

Thyme did give him a time of three minutes flat though. Which wasn't too bad