

DEMONS 1241

[Chapter 1241 1241 Second Jump: Gareth!](#)

---- Gareth ----

Gareth groaned as he stood up and walked over to the edge. The temptation to sit on it like Willow was strong, but he simply didn't have that kind of confidence. Especially not when he couldn't tell where exactly the edge was. Gareth personally suspected slight tricky or Thyme's part.

Looking over the edge, Gareth could see that this second jump was going to be nothing at all like the first. Where the first had a truly ridiculous amount of rings all stacked together, this second jump seemed to have only a few scattered rings. The problem was obviously just how far away they all were.

The first ring was quite a ways... North? Gareth couldn't tell where North was so high up in the sky. Especially not when the sun seemed to be missing now he was looking for it. More Thyme shenanigans probably. For now though, 'Forward' was North, backwards was South, with East to the right and West to the left.

The first ring wasn't too far below the platform, but he was going to really need to jump for it if he wanted to make it. Even then, Gareth wasn't entirely sure he could get all the way there without relying on those damned gloves. *Which is not a great place to be in because I've only recovered around ten percent of my mana. Maybe a touch more, it's a bit hard to tell. That leaves me pretty well high and dry because I can see how spread out these rings are, and I'm not sure how to deal with this.*

Gareth licked his lips as he studied the layout further trying to determine exactly how the rings were laid out. It was a little hard to tell further down. For example, in the North East corner there was definitely one ring, but perhaps it was actually two? Then there were the rings all clumped up around the South West. Gareth genuinely couldn't tell how many rings were down there. There was one much higher than the others, probably the second ring right after the first... but how many rings were underneath it? Gareth couldn't say. At least one, perhaps more.

I'm really not sure how I'm going to manage this one. As far as I can see the order is 'North, South-West, West...' then it gets a little fuzzy. There are at least two over in the East, then one more very very far to the North-West, way outside of the normal zone, and some more down under that one in the South-West but I can't tell how many from up here, or what the order is properly.

At least there is plenty of space between the earlier rings. At least, as far as I can tell. I should be able to get a good grip on where I need to go as I'm falling. The big question is if I can get from the first ring all the way down to the second without using the gloves. I'm really not sure if I can. Then the mess below that... yeah I've got no idea how this is supposed to go.

"Hey Thyme, can you tell me where all the rings are? Or what order they're in?" asked Gareth.

Thyme shook their head, "I'm afraid not. Going first really is a major bane in this particular contest it seems. Perhaps I should've randomised things between rounds as well, but it would've taken up extra time I didn't want to waste, not after yesterday,"

Gareth sighed, "You could've done it as a mirror. First to fifth, then fifth to first before first to fifth again,"

Thyme shrugged, "Perhaps I should've but the rules can't be changed now, so... hop to it,"

"Righto then..." Gareth looked behind him and saw that everyone was sort of crowding around the edge. "Can you all back up or move to the sides? I'm going to need a running start for this one,"

Gareth, in his exasperation for Thyme and worry over making it through the rings didn't even notice that much of his fear for the jump itself had already vanished. It's a wonder what a second exposure to a fear in such quick succession can do to a person. Gareth still wasn't completely calm, but his breathing didn't need careful managing anymore.

When everyone had shuffled out of the way, Gareth took a few careful steps back while keeping an eye on where the edge was. He'd felt it out a little bit and was just about ready... when he paused. Gareth looked down at his shoes. Stepping forward again Gareth go to the edge and started to untie them. I think you should take a look at

"What the heck are you doing?" asked Mauve.

"Giving you all a good idea," retorted Gareth. Soon his plan became clear. Gareth placed both boots sideways right on the edge of the platform and then walked back again. Everyone had a pretty clear idea of what Gareth was doing now. He walked back quite ways, needing the runup to really get his speed going.

Once ready, he took in a deep breath, he bent his knees and let out a long breath, he was ready. Gareth sprinted forward, pushing his legs to the limit for the short distance he had. Right at the edge, Gareth kicked off hard and he flew! It wasn't enough to get over the ring all by itself, but Gareth had more than enough forward momentum to keep him moving until he was there.

Gareth kept himself flattened, trying to get as much 'space' as possible to work with. As soon as the ring was 'taken' he angled himself and tried to move 'South West' towards the next ring... and found it to be rather hard. Dammit. I wish I had some proper way of moving. I better fucking not need these damned gloves I don't have the mana for this shit.

Gareth was making his way over... but it was clear he was going to miss it. Gritting his teeth, Gareth activated the glove once more, losing a huge chunk of mana in the process, to no surprise. He'd overshot the ring though. Gareth wanted to curse, but held it in as he managed to just barely angle himself and grab the second ring.

Keeping his current form and moving North he managed to, relatively slowly, make his way over to the next ring. As he was going, Gareth scanned the sky below him and tried to work out what he was going to do. There was... three? He was pretty sure it was three rings over in the East... and he just didn't have the mana to go and get them. Not if he wanted to come all the way back to the West side to finish the round up, and certainly not if he wanted any mana left in the tank for the final round.

I can't risk it. I'm going to have to stick on this side I think. I'm losing out on three rings... it's still a bit hard to make out from here, but they do seem to be two separate rings close together and the one 'next' in line. Of course the big 'final ring' at the bottom is more than large enough for me to target it regardless of what side I'm on... but there are at least two rings on this side, probably three so I'm going to stick with it.

With the decision made it wasn't hard at all to get over the 'next' ring, at least the next one Gareth was intending to go for. Gareth did keep his gaze on that fourth ring as it passed. Even if he had determined it wasn't worth it... it did feel like missing a large opportunity. Gareth sighed, but turned to face the ring in front of him, getting ready to head back South.

The ring glowed, and it was time. Gareth looked over at the two rings he was giving up, and the temptation to just... use his gloves to get over there was strong. He stamped that down though. It wasn't worth it. He'd need both gloves to make it, and that would drain him far too much.

That was when Gareth's eyes widened. Down at the bottom, the final rings he was going through were in fact THREE rings all bunched up together. It looked more like two rings for quite a long time, but it was actually two rings that were basically touching, and then a third a good distance below that, with the final ring not much lower down.

Gareth grinned. The gamble had paid off. It was no issue falling through the last four rings, and when he landed, despite the fact he mana had dropped and he'd missed a whole three rings... Gareth couldn't help but feel like he'd made the correct decision.

"Gareth has finished the course in a rather clean three minutes and thirty-six seconds," said Thyme with a bow, "Of course he did miss three rings along the way, which is a whopping one minute and thirty second penalty, which brings his total for this round up to five minutes and six seconds,"

That might sound somewhat bad... but I honestly think it was the right call.

[Chapter 1242 1242 Second Jump: Nabras Featuring Willow](#)

---- Nabras ----

Nabras looked over the edge. Gareth's jump hadn't made him any less nervous. The fact that he had to sprint off the damned platform to make it through the first ring? Yeah that wasn't helping matters.

Gareth is also a bastard that took his shoes back. He hadn't even put them back on!

Nabras' internal monologue was correct that Gareth had taken his shoes back, but was assuming malicious intent where there wasn't any. Gareth had moved his shoes just in case someone tripped on them, and tried to get Gareth in trouble for leaving them there. Nothing was stopping Nabras from putting his own shoes there on the edge. He was too busy being annoyed with Gareth to think of that part though. Nobody else was looking to point it out to him either.

Still, he looked down at the rings and wasn't sure how he wanted to do things. Gareth had skipped all the rings on the right side, and that had 'cost' him a minute and a half. That was a lot of time and Nabras was determined to find some way to make it up. After a bit of thought, he decided the best way to go about it was to skip going to the second ring, hope he could make it from the third to the fourth without using his gloves, then activate them to get to the one over in the North-West corner, perhaps activate them a second time to get to the two in the North East, then use them one final time to get to the last ring in South-West.

Nabras hadn't realised there was quite so many rings in the South-West. Even watching Gareth go for them all, it was hard to tell. Additionally, Gareth hadn't made any comments about them, nor had Thyme mentioned how many rings Gareth had made it through. Perhaps it wouldn't matter.

Nabras stepped back for his run-up and then launched himself into the sky. He was aiming to just barely nick the side of the first ring. He was 'flying' over there and was trying to line up the best he could. Just to be save, he kept most of his body over the ring as he went through. As soon as it flashed? He was gone. Nabras was angling himself over towards the third ring. *Novelnext.COM*

Nabras had a plan for this one as well. He was moving off to the side with the time he'd gained not going for the second ring, and planned to build up a bit of speed and clear the third ring while heading towards the fourth. He'd already gone further West then needed for the third ring. His decision was locked in.

Nabras waited until the timing was right, or at least, he hoped it was, and then started headed back East. He nearly missed the third ring, but it DID flash, and Nabras let out a long breath he didn't know he was holding while moving towards the fourth. He was going to cut it close there as well... but he was going for it.

Nabras was worried he was going to miss, this time for real... but almost as if by magic he hit a nice tailwind and managed to just barely get into the fourth ring. Not wasting any time he blasted himself back the way he came and headed for the fifth ring. This time, he made it without any worried.

Another blast. His mana felt sluggish and empty. He really wanted to rest, to recover but he couldn't, not just yet. He managed to make it through the sixth and seventh rings. Did he go for the last ones?

His mana was low. His arms were shaking, and this would be nearly all of his mana. He was already heading in that direction just in case... but he didn't know. He almost couldn't decide... until he realise it wasn't one ring. It wasn't two either. No it was three. If he didn't do this, he would be down three rings!

Nabras grit his teeth as a third blast of air rattled the bones in his arm. He slipped through the final three rings and then was teleported back up to the platform... just in time for him to collapse to the ground. Arms shaking, mana nearly empty. He didn't even hear what Thyme was saying. What was his score? Nabras didn't know. Couldn't find it in himself to care at the moment either. I think you should take a look at

---- Willow ----

Willow frowned at how exhausted Nabras looked. She wanted to think on that a bit, but the score came first. "A wonderful performance from Nabras here. He managed to complete the course in three minutes and fifty-eight seconds... oh but he missed just the one ring along the way. Leaving him with a final time of four minutes and twenty-eight seconds,"

*Hmm... I didn't use up all that much mana last round. I thought it might've been the same as everyone except Mauve... but seeing Nabras so exhausted... perhaps not? Then again... was he using just one glove or two? It's hard to tell from looking up here. Nabras seems completely out of it... so he has to be just about empty. Surely four blasts total isn't enough to be out of mana... right?

Dammit, I wish I could compare with Gareth but he took the 'easier' way out and managed to just use the one blast to secure the left side. It probably would've been smarter to follow Nabras' route, but there must be something I'm not seeing. Well, no Gareth might not have realised there were two rings up in the North-East side of things.*

Willow walked forward and once again sat down on the edge so she could study her path. *So I can theoretically go... ring one, blast to ring two, grab rings three, five, and then head over for six and seven, skipping two, before heading back down to the corner to get ring eight. Though maybe eight and nine? Would Nabras have really used the gloves at the end there if it was just the one ring? Especially seeing how tired he is now? I suppose he might not have been paying attention.

Damn, I just don't know what the best strategy is. I think I should skip either the second ring, like Nabras, or the fourth ring. Then again... if I can manage to grab the second ring without a blast, then get the third, I could get, one, two, three, five, six, seven, eight, or eight and nine for just two uses of the gloves. I'm just not quite sure if I can manage to grab the second ring without using them.

Of course, the question of 'do you even need to save the gloves' does come up. I'm not quite full on mana but I'm not that far off either. I could easily manage three bursts. My arms might not, but my mana pool can. The question is... how many will I need for the final round and is it worth taking a riskier line to save that extra... twenty percent or so of mana?

Tough... really tough. If I try to make it to the second ring I'm not going to be able to correct it with a burst. I'll be much too close to the ring by the time its clear I'm going to fail. Then again... if I do fuck it up that's only one extra ring 'missed' and I'll have a lot more mana than Nabras that's for sure. I guess it's a question of what everyone else is doing... but I think I should take the risk.*

Willow took off her shoes, and placed them along the edge before getting up. Gareth did have a good idea after all. It would be a shame not to use it. Willow moved back, further then the other two. She knew she needed as much speed as possible for this jump. Heck, even if she overshot it that would be fine, because she could, hopefully, turn her momentum around and head for ring two while going through ring one. That would be ideal.

Willow didn't know it, but Thyme was extending the platform they were on as she kept backpedalling. Step by step, she carefully strode backwards trying to get as much distance as she could, but not wanting to fall off the other side. Not knowing there was zero risk of such a thing. She clearly didn't want to jump off, so the platform continued to extend.

Willow now had a run-up of over 100m and she still wasn't sure that it was enough. Thyme wasn't saying anything, and didn't look to like they were going to force her to jump soon. There was one worry though. *This is taking quite a while. I'm just giving everyone more time to get there mana back... but I need that run-up. But... but how big is this damned platform? I know most of the speed I'll gain will be at the start... maybe I should stop? No. Not... not just yet.*

[Chapter 1243 1243 Where Willow Left Off](#)

---- Willow ----

Willow estimated she now had about three hundred metres to work with, and had decided that was going to be enough. At this point, it was... rather obvious that Thyme was just extending the platform. She'd been walking on 'thin air' for quite a while now, and Thyme had started tapping their foot. So... yes best time to just be off. She'd stick to the plan.

Go for the first ring, desperately try to get the second ring without using the gloves. Go through the third, skip the fourth, grab the fifth, then blast over to get the sixth and seventh before blasting back to get the last one or two rings at the bottom corner. It was a good plan, even better than Willow thought considering there were three rings in the South-West at the end, not two as Willow was thinking.

Willow went to take a runner's start with hands on the ground... then realised that the ground had no give to it. It was a completely static surface reinforced by Thyme's will. So there was just no point. Instead she just got into position as if she was part way through a step. Waited a breath... then took off.

Willow felt her heart pumping in her ears as she pushed her legs as fast as they would go. She needed as much speed as they could give her. Even if she was exhausted afterwards, she just needed the speed for a few more moments...

Willow nearly tripped at the edge. She would never admit it, but in her running she'd been rather distracted by forcing herself to go as fast as she could. It was only the shoes she'd left behind that clued her in, and it still took a half second to remember WHY there was shoes there on the first place. That slight delay was nearly too long, but Willow managed it.

She rocketed off the platform, her speed carrying her through the air much further than the two men before her. Willow was ready though, she unbuttoned her shirt then spread her arms wide, trying to get as much drag as possible... then head back the way she came. Willow claimed the first ring as she was making progress and grinned when she just barely scraped into ring two without using her gloves at all.

A short glide North to be above the third ring and Willow was biting her lip. The temptation to use her gloves to get over to the fourth ring was high... but it would then cost her a second charge just to get back to the fifth ring in the North-West, directly above her right now. It just wasn't worth it.

Willow claimed the fourth ring and glided forward until she was over the fifth ring then she started to ready her hands. She buttoned up her shirt again, fumbling a little over a few of the buttons, and wasting perhaps too much time with it. Then she got in position. Both hands against her chest, with the one she wanted to activate on top.

As soon as she made it through the fifth ring, Willow pushed her mana into the damned thing. She felt her ribs creaking against the pressure, but held strong. She spun in the air once, just to get her bearings and managed to glide over and through the sixth and seventh rings up in the North-East quadrant.

Switching hands... and moving her gloves down to her stomach, accepting the pain this would cause but not trusting her ribs with the recoil... Willow activated the cursed things. The air was forced from Willow's lungs, and a bit of bile left her mouth. Willow ignored that though. She just needed to get through the last... the last THREE RINGS. Oh you sneaky shit Thyme.

Willow didn't say anything else, she just angled herself as best she could manage through the pain and fell down through the last of the rings, and the final one. Willow stumbled as her feet hit the ground. Even with Thyme stealing the momentum somehow, she was in pain and nearly fell over. She was down

a perfectly acceptable amount of mana, just to around half, and she'd done it all with only a single ring being skipped. Well that and her legs felt like they were on fire, but that was fine really. Completely fine. "Give me the time," said Willow. Though it also seemed that she sounded a bit like someone who'd swallowed some sand. *Woops. I sound horrible. Hmm... well maybe that will make people think I've used up more mana then it seems.*

"Yes indeed what a show!" said Thyme with a grin. "You've managed the fall in three minutes and forty seconds. Just four seconds off Gareth! That is of course, not taking into account the fact that you have a penalty to your name. Alas, for missing the one ring, you'll be adding thirty seconds to your time, bringing you up to four minutes and ten seconds"

---- Mauve ---- I think you should take a look at

*Hmm... Willow seems to have the right of it. Get a good run, hit one, two, three, skip four, five, blast, six and seven, then go for however many rings are over in the corner. Probably another two. It seems like a solid path. Is there any way I can do it better? I could go from one to two then skip three to go to four... but really that's just making work for myself. I'd still need to get to five, probably with a blast, then back for six and seven. Not really sure why Nabras did his the way he did. Willow's ordering looks so much better. Then again, I suppose he wasn't confident he could grab the second ring without using up an extra blast.

Right then. So the question is do I skip four myself? I didn't use any mana up in the first round, and I stand by that decision. So I need to work out how much mana I'm willing to use up here. Mauve put her shoes down, much like Gareth and Willow before her, and started to jog away from the starting line. With Willow showing that it extended for ages she wasn't worried.

When I was testing things it took up about twenty percent of my mana per charge. A bit less really, but more than fifteen percent. Wish I was a bit better at managing those numbers.. .but eh whatever. So I go for one and two with this strategy, then go for three and five, six and seven, then the final rings. Nope, I can't think of anything better and honestly I don't feel like wasting time trying to figure out how to get a better path, if there even is one.*

From there, Mauve did much the same as Willow did, with slightly more success. Mauve didn't bother to unbutton her shirt and nearly overshot the first ring, but made it up by making it to the second ring with more space to spare. The third and fifth rings were easy, and Mauve was strong enough to just tank the 'hit' from the gloves with her arm instead of worrying about her chest.

There went six and seven, where Mauve worked out the secret. That the final ring set was a set of three. *Damn. That's gotta be why Nabras exhausted himself. He realised he couldn't miss all three of them otherwise he'd have been even worse off then Gareth.*

Of course, going for them was Mauve's plan all along so she shot over to them and made it through the final ring with no issues. She didn't almost collapse, when returned to the ground, and didn't bother speaking. Instead, she just panted, let them think it whatever they want. Going down to sixty percent mana wasn't too bad, but the adrenaline was a heck of a thing.

"For Mauve we've got a lovely time here of... damn, three minutes and forty-one seconds! Right on Willow's heels. With the same route, you take the same thirty second penalty. That brings your score, Mauve, to four minutes and eleven seconds" *nOVelnext.cOm*

---- Cyan ----

For Cyan, it wasn't hard to work out what to do. Mauve and Willow had gone for pretty much the same tactic, and it had worked out seemingly quite well for all of them. Gareth might have been faster getting to the bottom, but he lost out hard on the penalties. Still, Cyan knew what to do. Even if he'd had trouble meditating unlike the others, he had enough mana for this. Probably.

So it went like this. Shoes off, then jogging two hundred or so metres. Turning around and sprinting for dear life and then slowing down in the air, switching directions and claiming the first ring. Like Mauve, Cyan ignored the whole... taking of the shirt thing. With that done, he went through the second ring, then the third, then the fifth all no trouble.

To get to the sixth and seventh rings, Cyan pulled his legs in tight and used them to take the brunt of the gloves impact. Horrible idea really because no his knees were sore, but he'd live. Through six and seven, then Cyan used the glove to get over to the final three, and wasn't that a surprise? Sure his arms hurt after shooting towards them, but that was fine. He'd recover before the final round. Hopefully.

"Once more, we see a similar pattern... but has it paid off? Somewhat. It seems Cyan here has managed a time of three minutes and forty-six seconds, which while very respectable, does fall a few seconds short of the two that came before him. Adding in the one penalty, that leaves Cyan with four minutes and sixteen seconds as his final time!"

Really not what I was hoping for considering I only have around twenty percent of my mana left... but I suppose I'll take what I can get. The final round is going to be... risky. I might need to risk passing out just to get a decent score. Hmm...

[Chapter 1244 1244 Aerial Relaxation](#)

--- Kat --- (Before First Jump)

Thyme had set up a nice area for everyone to watch the jumps. They'd provided five large couches, one for each of the teams. You might think that would still be a bit cramped with four people per couch, but that simply wasn't the couch. There was so much space on each of them, that three people could lay down and still not be touching each other. Four was a bit too much though.

The room, while floating in the air, was set up a bit like a cinema, with two of the couches in the front, one in the very middle, and two at the back. Kat's team ended up on the back right couch. Kress picked one of the sides and was leaning against the arm rest. Green had insisted Nixilei grab the other one... then lay down across Nixilei's lap, using the arm rest as a bedhead and Nixilei's thighs as a pillow. Kat was in the centre and awkwardly wondering if she should move to one of the sides or not. There was still plenty of space, even with Green laying down.

Sure Kat could stretch her wings... but Thyme had clearly worked out a similar enchantment to demon furniture so her wings could comfortably sit inside the couch... somehow. *Perhaps finding out how exactly the furniture works would be useful in the future. It's obviously not just empty space. Not only

does the couch still work as if it was stuffed properly, but my wings feel supported but not... surrounded? Probably the best way to describe it.*

[I do sort of know what you're talking about Kat. They work with my tail as well. Though... yes it is a bit strange. I prefer just having my tail resting on my stomach or something though.]

Yes it's the same for me. It might be nice for my wings but leaving my tail... wherever it is my wings go just isn't all that comfortable. My tail is a lot longer than yours though, so I just have to put up with it. Enough about that though. Did you want to lay on my lap like Green is doing?

[I don't really mind. I'm perfectly happy to stay on your lap like this. It's quite comfortable. Sure it's nice when I'm human... but it also becomes inherently more sexual. Like... it's not something I usually think about, and just something like a lap pillow really isn't going to force my thoughts down that road quickly...]

[But this is just nice. I don't have to worry about doing anything inappropriate, or being embarrassed. Even if people know I'm not just a cat, they don't think twice about the fact that there is a cat on your lap. It's just... less embarrassing I guess.]

You know I don't care about that at all Lily. I'll happily kiss you in public if that's what you want. I don't mind one bit.

[I know... but I do mind. Sort of. I mean, I'm never going to complain if you were to kiss me. I love your kisses. Just... don't expect me to be terribly coherent if you do. Still... the experience is... I don't want to say tainted really because that implies the kiss isn't good. Um... I suppose it's just not as good as it could be. I know it's all in my head really, but it does spoil the experience knowing I'm being watched by people who aren't you. Maybe it would be better if I was used to it, or if I'm not thinking about it.]

[Just... it's hard to stop thinking about it once it gets in your head. I don't think you can properly understand... well you can see my memories so you've got a better chance than most. It's... it's almost like quantum physics. Knowing that I'm being observed changes the experience. Even if logically I know I'm being observed by someone, most of the time, it's the thinking and knowing about it that causes problems.]

Not to say that you've lost me, because I am still following the conversation... but I really can't understand that. It just doesn't quite... line up for me. I'm not embarrassed about my affection for you, and I don't care if people know that. Which... now that I'm saying that 'aloud' sounds kind of like I'm implying you do care, which I'm not exactly trying to... hmm...

[No, no. It's... it's odd. I have no problems claiming you as my girlfriend, or even having you claim me as your girlfriend. Even just announcing that sort of thing implies... quite a lot. I'm perfectly comfortable with people knowing and understanding that we get up to that sort of thing... so I'm really not sure why I'm so embarrassed about it sometimes.]

I really can't say.

While this was happening Nixilei sighed and looked down at Green. "Is this really necessary? Not only is there enough space for you to use the couch, but there are extra cushions here for you to use if you want. Surely my legs can't be the most comfortable option here," I think you should take a look at

"No, but it annoys you, and that pleases me greatly," said Green with a smug grin.

Nixilei sighed and said, "I'm your bodyguard, not your made or your girlfriend. Theoretically I don't have to put up with this nonsense. You do know this is going to cause my legs to fall asleep right?"

"Ah, but you love me anyway so you're going to put up with it. Plus, you're a super smart healer. I'm sure you can keep the circulation in your legs going even with my big head," retorted Green.

Nixilei rolled her eyes and looked over to Kress before saying, "And what are you doing over there..." Nixilei paused, "And where the heck did you get popcorn from?"

"Storage ring," answered Kress, "As for what I'm doing... sitting down? I don't really want to get involved with..." Kress waved his hand towards Green and Nixilei, "whatever that is. I'm sure it would only be trouble for me. Plus, Kat and Lily are having couple time, even if it doesn't look like it. You can tell they're talking to each other right now,"

"Yes, I'm aware of that much," said Nixilei. "They're not exactly subtle about it. Lily's ears stand up straight and tend to flick towards Kat occasionally even though they aren't saying anything, while Kat always looks somewhat dazed while talking to Lily. Hmm... that's not quite the right word, but it's close enough for you to get the picture. Though now I want to know why you brought your storage ring with you, and where the popcorn was from before that,"

"Well I don't have to worry about it getting damaged because I'm not competing today," explained Kress, "and I do remember how board everyone got yesterday during the volleyball tournament. I'm hoping it won't be that bad today, but I thought I'd bring my ring just in case. This way I've got something to mess around with. I performance some maintenance on my gear, or play dice games. Got a whole bag full of them in here,"

"I probably should've done the same," mumbled Nixilei. "I could've gotten a start on my reports, or perhaps studied some medical text while sitting here. That still doesn't explain the popcorn though,"

"Oh... well you see, I asked if Thyme could supply me with just... a ridiculous amount of popcorn. It was at the end of the first day, and I sort of forgot I asked for it you know? Anyway I tucked it all away in my storage ring and, as I said before, forgot about it. I'm not even sure what I was thinking when I asked for it if I'm honest. I think I was going to use it to prank Gareth? Maybe? I really don't remember so it can't have been that funny,"

"I was under the impression your memory was a bit better then that," sneered Nixilei.

Kress just shrugged at the question. Not really sure what else to say, and not willing to let things turn into a fight. After doing so well the day before, and getting to make an awesome sandcastle Kress was feeling quite chill. Well, that and he was still tired. He had a bit of trouble getting to sleep and this couch was awfully comfortable.

Seeing that Kress wasn't rising to the bait, Nixilei turned her gaze back to the 'screen' in front of them. It was just a big white square at the moment. Apparently Thyme didn't want to display the practice runs. Nixilei thought that was a bit of shame. It would've been a great source of material for teasing people, and perhaps blackmailing if the scene was particularly embarrassing.

Despite it being a shame from a work standpoint, Nixilei did think it was probably for the best. Thyme had managed to keep things rather casual... somehow. She didn't feel the pressure to win like she had in the previous rounds. Then again, her team was quite solidly in the lead. So perhaps that had more to do with it. As Nixilei gazed around at the people all sitting together on couches, mostly with smiles... well she couldn't help but doubt her conclusion.

[Chapter 1245 1245 Messing Around During Jump 1](#)

--- Kat --- (During First Jump)

The first round had started. Gareth was making his jump... and Kat couldn't see anything. Apparently Thyme wasn't using space to show them what was happening this time, just more standard illusion magic. Something Kat could see through. She only knew that anything was happening because everyone had gotten much quieter, and Lily's memories helped fill in the gap.

It was a bit annoying to watch things that way though. It was a bit like watching a movie and pausing it every five seconds. Kat would look over the memory in Lily's mind, but as it was still being written, it just stopped occasionally. Kat wasn't sure what was causing this disconnect, but it wasn't pleasant. *I feel like we're doing this the wrong way. Do you think it would be possible for me to look through your eyes? We've sort of done similar things in the past.*

[True... but that was using your dream powers.]

Sure, but that does prove it's possible. We just need to figure out how.

[Well what do you suggest?]

Probably best to start by closing my own eyes... then I don't know? I'll try and picture myself looking through yours. See how that goes?

[That makes sense. Let me know if you want me to do anything to help with that.] *nOveLnext.com*

Kat nodded. The temptation to turn into smoke and watch from Lily's mind was strong, but that would be cheating. No, it was better to try and figure out way to share Lily's vision while they were both aware and moving around in the real world. That would probably open up more options. Even Kat had heard stories of wizards being able to see through their familiars, so it should be possible. Perhaps even easy now they were trying.

Kat started to lightly massage Lily's little shoulders while brushing the underside of her cheeks. As Kat's hands did that, Kat herself closed her eyes and sunk into meditation. She could see her little pond, but that wasn't quite what she wanted right now. No, she wanted to be more awake then this... but perhaps this was a start?

Kat 'explored' her little mental construct and saw a little pathway of water that went from her mind somewhere else. Probably to Lily's. Kat pushed her awareness towards it and then tried to press down it. Kat hesitate, right at the edge, she could feel that if she pressed further she would get to Lily's mind... but it would also activate her dream walking ability. Which was not the point of this testing.

*Ok... so do I need a different image? Do I need to find... what a pair of floating eyeballs somewhere in my mental pond and shove them down the stream? Hmmm... that might actually work. If I could find them. I don't exactly have a bunch of signs pointing out what body parts the things in here represent. If they even represent anything.

Could I make them though? Maybe a fish or something? They aren't exactly associated with seeing clearly but my mental landscape is a pond. Then again... maybe I need something different? What about imagining an owl flying down the pathway between our minds and looking at it?

Though neither of those things stays 'connected' to me. A video camera might work... but that just seems really wrong. It doesn't fit with how my mind is set up at all. I wish I knew more about how this mental organisation technique is supposed to work. Actually, could just duck out and ask demons. Wait. No I can't, because Stan's here and that might constitute an unfair advantage. Dammit.

Does that mean I need to put this whole thing off then? Wait until we're back on Earth or just doing another mission? I suppose that is possible... but that would be rather annoying. It's not like we'll have ready access to illusions. So... am I just going to have to tinker around with it?*

[I guess so?]

Wait you could hear my rambling?

[Yes? I'm not sure if you were trying to hide it at all, but yes I can hear it. Well, for a given definition of hear, but you know what I mean.]

Kat sent over a mental nod of affirmation, and then got to work trying to mess with things. Creating a fish turned out to be really easy, but it also felt deeply wrong. Kat didn't know why that was, but it seeing as it was even easier to remove, having taken barely a thought, Kat couldn't help but feel that she was going about things in the wrong way.

While Kat was doing that, everyone else was actually watching the jump... except Green. "Gareth's about to jump you know? Aren't you going to sit up and watch?" asked Nixilei.

"I can see just fine from here," retorted Green from Nixilei's lap. Nixilei, an expert in sightlines, new for a fact this was a lie.

"Why are you even bothering to lie about that?" asked Nixilei after a few moments. She'd considered talking around the issue, or poking Green about it a bit until she sat up... but it wasn't even a good lie. It was easily seen through. Nixilei frowned, wondering if she was being distracted for some reason. I think you should take a look at

Kress, over on the other side of the couch, was looking carefully at Kat and Lily who hadn't really moved much recently. Their minds, hopefully, on other things. Nixilei was now glaring down at Green, so it was the perfect time to mess with her. Kress pulled a tiny block of ice from his storage ring and flicked it over at Nixilei... and instead hit Kat's horns.

Kress could see Green give him a quick glare that Nixilei, hopefully, didn't notice. Kress suppressed a wince and looked over at Kat and Lily. Kat hadn't reacted at all. It's not like he'd thrown it hard, and he supposed that Kat mustn't feel the cold... but it was odd she didn't notice at all. Kress glanced down at Lily who was staring back at him.

'Sorry' mouthed Kress. Who then mimed throwing things over them and pointing at Nixilei. Lily rolled her eyes and went back to watching, but didn't rat him and Green out, so that was something.

All that movement had attracted Nixilei's attention though. Kress, pretending not to have been looking, simply brought another bit of popcorn up to his mouth. He was hoping she hadn't noticed, or if she had, that the movement she'd picked up on was dismissed as him eating popcorn like he had been for the past few minutes.

Nixilei, sadly for Kress, had noticed. She was more bewildered by the fact that Green and Kress, assuming they were working together, thought that this was a good idea, or that she wouldn't notice. Perhaps she needed to impress upon them that she still kept up with her spy training somehow.

Eventually, Nixilei turned her gaze back to the jumps, making it look like her curiosity had been sated. Green, in another bid to distract Nixilei, first got Kress' attention, and then pretended to sneeze. Nixilei, playing along, looked down at Green and said, "Are you alright? I'd rather not have you on my lap if you've got a cold,"

As Nixilei was speaking, Kress wound his hand up and threw another piece of ice towards Nixilei. Nixilei didn't panic, just simply bounced her legs, throwing Green's face upwards... and right into the path of the ice. Green spluttered at the rough treatment, "Hey what's the big idea!"

"I'm not so easily distracted, Green, Kress," said Nixilei with a grin.

"Booo, you were so distracted," said Green.

"Green, if that were in any way true why is it that you just got hit with an ice cube but I'm sitting here fine," returned Nixilei.

"You can't prove anything," said Green with a pout.

"Green, I... you know what? Whatever, be childish about this if you want. I don't even know what this is supposed to be revenge for," grumbled Nixilei.

Green huffed, but didn't say anything else. Kress just shrugged and went back to eating popcorn. Then Kat's head caught fire. All three of them reared back in slight panic... but Kat didn't seem... bothered? "Uh... Kat... you're on fire?" said Kress awkwardly.

Kat opened her eyes and saw that Kress was right. Her head was on fire. "Woops. Clearly that wasn't right," said Kat before promptly putting the fire out and closing her eyes again.

"What... what was that about?" asked Green confused.

"I... I really don't know..." mumbled Nixilei.

"Are we being pranked?" asked Kress.

All three of them looked over at Lily, who was definitely smirking at this point, then up to Kat who looked completely peaceful. "I really can't tell," said Green.

"I... I think even if those two weren't trying to prank us before, by making a big deal about it we've turned it into one," said Nixilei.

"That makes sense," said Kress with a sage nod and a fake moustache he'd pulled from somewhere.

[Chapter 1246 1246 Back To Jumping](#)

--- Gareth --- (Following right on from 1243)

Gareth looked over the edge at the final jump. The first thing that came into his mind was. Well this is a mess. Things didn't exactly get better from there. The first jump, had been a straight shot with an optional objective. The second jump had been a series of rings with a few surprises, but nothing too crazy. Looking down at the rings below him... Gareth couldn't even work out how many rings there were even supposed to be.

It was at least double the number of rings from the previous round, but instead of nice, neat little bunches that had minimal overlap. There was overlap basically everywhere. The straight down angle really didn't help things. Especially not when some of the rings were quite close together.

If taken with the same 'North, Sout, East, West' framework as before. The closest ring was definitely in the South. It was in fact, so far South that it was actually behind Gareth even as he stood on the edge. So that would be fun. The next ring... that was harder to say. Just off to the East and West from the centre of the ring formations were two sets of three rings... but it was a honestly quite hard to tell which of those came first. They were bunched closely together and Gareth was certain that you'd need to boost across to pick up both sets. Which set was higher up? That was the question wasn't it.

Then after that the rings split, going out to the North-East and South-West. It was a little easier to tell which one came first. That was likely the one to the south. The one in the North seemed to be smaller. But that might've just been the fact the Southern one was closer to where Gareth was standing right now, simply because the platform he was standing on was 'in the South'.

Below that... things really did get harder to judge. There was quite a number of rings underneath all of that, but how big they were, what order you'd need to go through them in, and exactly which ones could be skipped and what couldn't... well... that was a lot harder to guess at. Gareth could see that there were some more rings in the centre, some off to the South under the very first ring, some to the East and West that didn't quite line up with the first set, and some really far off in the North-West corner. Those rings stood alone... but it was unclear if it was just the one ring or not really. Gareth was pretty sure there was at least two up there, but it was just so hard to tell.

Well this is going to be a major issue isn't it? I can't even tell exactly where all the rings are in relation to each other so how the heck am I supposed to plan my route? It's not like I've got enough mana to get all the rings. I'm... maybe forty-five percent full? That gives me one use of the gloves, and then a second use that will get me to pass out in the process. So if I have to use them a second time I need to make sure it's towards the end. The question is though... where should I use my one or two boosts?

Gareth looked over the rings he could see again and frowned. I might need to use one to get both sets of three that are together in the centre near the top. They are awfully close together. If that's the case... one has to be used there. I think. Three rings for one boost is a good deal, and I'm probably not going to get a better one. The problem then is... can I use the second charge? Do I need to? Where exactly can I skip out on things?

Gareth let out a long breath as he looked down at the rings. So far he'd only pathed out from the first ring, to the sixth. That was a pathetically small amount of the total rings on display but he just didn't know where to go from there. It was hard to tell how much space he had to work with.

How about I just play it safe? Get those three rings, as well as the one 'below' me and then head for the North-East to get the next set of two then try to get as many of the rings near the middle as I can? Hmm... I feel like that might not be the best idea but I just can't see things properly so I have no idea if it's going to be better to do something else. Damn. I guess I'll just have to go for it and hope for the best.

Gareth sighed once again and got ready. He sucked in a deep breath and stepped off the platform, letting his foot and body fall down forward. He kept leaning until he momentum swept his other foot off the platform and he started to plummet down. The first ring was decently far away, but he had plenty of time to get it. Just a nice fall down through the first ring... and done. Easy. Wish it would be like that the whole way. I think you should take a look at

Gareth turned his body and started to head for the next set of rings. From this angle it was... still rather hard to tell what rings he needed to aim for. This was made worse by the fact that he could see that both sets of rings were in order, from South, to North, but they looked about the same size...**NoVeLnext.COM**

Gareth narrowed his eyes. Wait a fucking second. That's the trick with this round. Thyme didn't make the blasted rings the same size! That little shit! I can't tell which set of rings is higher because whichever one is lower down is smaller then the one above it! Well unless you can only pick one set... but that doesn't seem like something Thyme would do. Shit. Let's just move over there and hope I can figure out something. The one on the East is a little closer to me... so should I be aiming for that one? Or the one further away.

Gareth chewed on his lip as he flew towards the rings, trying desperately to spot something that would let him figure out which answer was the correct one. He looked, from left to right and back again. Then, just as he was about to give up, he noticed something. The rings. The rings from the East ALL looked the same size, well roughly speaking. While the ones to the West looked to be further down, and further North.

Well let's hope that's right. Gareth made his choice and moved over to the rings. Just managing to line himself up in time to get through them. As he looked over at the other set, it was abundantly clear he'd chosen correctly. They were noticeably lower down then the first three. "Hahahaha" Gareth let out a pleased bout of laughter. It had just been a guess, but he'd nailed it. Shame that everyone else would know because they could copy him, but that was just how it was.

Gareth cleared the first three, then used an almost painful amount of his remaining mana, setting him down to less then one use on his gauntlets. The pain in his arms barely registering, that was just the norm for the damned device now. Still, that was six rings down and Gareth was pleased with that.

Gareth started his move to the North-West. Those rings were quite far away, and sur he'd need to give up a set of three to get to them, but they were higher then quite a few other rings he could now see as well. So it just seemed like the best idea. As Gareth made his way over though, he examined the field still before him.

*Right so there's three sets of two 'in the middle' of the field so to speak. One off to either side, and one right in the middle. Then there's that final(?) ring right in the centre. Gareth new he could claim all of them without too much issue. No, the real issue was the ring, or rings down in the South and slightly West as well as the North-West set.

That could be a lot of rings I'm giving up... but well. I just don't think I have the mana to get them all. Heck I don't think I have the mana to get any of them. So... centre it is. Though...

Gareth looked over the three sets and squinted a bit. Hmm, depending on if Thyme is using any further trickery then I think the order is middle, East, West, but going all the way from East to West would take another charge of my gloves. So... shit I might miss that last ring... and I don't know if it's just the one ring either or another set of close ones. Shit. Shit.*

Occasionally missing content, please report errors in time.

[Chapter 1247 1247 FREE. FREEFALLING!](#)

--- Gareth ---

Gareth grit his teeth as he cleared the eleventh ring, then the twelfth ring just below it. He'd committed to the plan. Somewhat. It just wasn't going to be fun. He didn't know exactly how it was going to play out, but the next steps were at least somewhat clear. Gareth started to head towards the next set of rings and tried to see just how many rings the 'ring' below him in the centre was made up of. *If only I could tell! Damn it all! If I knew I would know if it's worth going unconscious to tag the last set of two!*

Gareth grimaced. He knew he hadn't exactly been fast getting through all of these rings, he'd been maximising his surface area for the most part, so missing out on one or two extra rings could be a massive deal. *It probably won't be enough for second place.* Whispered a traitorous part of his mind, but Gareth shoved that voice down quickly. That wasn't the point. *This is my task and I will see it through.*

And like that Gareth had found his answer. He glided through the first set of two rings, then angled himself to the East, picking up the fifteenth and sixteenth ring without issue. Then he looked down at his hand. He knew what had to be done. Gareth pointed his hand outwards, and let the glove rip his mana from him.

Several things happened at once. Black shades sprung into the corners of his vision. His arm, the one he'd used to launch himself, felt like it had been flayed then the muscles salted afterwards just to make a point. The rest of his body was on fire, and it burned and ached. The black shades seemed to whisper of sweet nothings. Of how he could rest now. That his task was done.

Yet it was NOT DONE. Gareth turned his body the best he could, barely registering the glow that signalled he'd made it through the next two rings. Gareth rolled in the air after that, heading for the area above the 'final ring'. The shades almost seemed hungry now. Those twisting figures of black were consuming more and more of his vision. The ring(s?) in the distance were all he could see. An intense focus on the golden light.

Gareth felt his mind starting to spin, or was that his body? He couldn't tell anymore as his senses started to disconnect. The taste of bile giving way to ash. The feel of the wind brushing against his body turning

to chill. The whistling in his ears as he fell instead turning to silence. The shades hungered for that last bit of space. That last golden speck Gareth could see in his mind.

And they claimed it. Long before he could arrive at the last ring he could see. His vision darkened. Gareth wasn't even aware enough to hope he'd lined things up correctly before the void claimed him.

--- Nabras ---

Nabras stared at the wooden cutout of Gareth and swallowed hard. Thyme was smiling, bright gleaming eyes that almost seemed to hide a hint of malice in them now. Perhaps that was just Nabras' mind jumping to things. Perhaps it was his own rapidly beating heart influencing him. The fact that he'd not really recovered much mana at all. Nabras glared down at the accursed glove on his hands.

I'm not using this fucking thing. Gareth was doing a lot better than I... but... the spinning... and the falling. I don't even know if I want to know what his score is.

"There you have it! Gareth has finished his final run. Alas, you may notice Gareth is not here in front of you, but a rather fetching wooden cut-out of him that I fashioned myself," Thyme said with a grin. Nabras wanted to be sick. Then again, he'd felt that way since the end of the second jump so that didn't really have anything to do with Thyme's words. "See, sadly, Gareth has fallen unconscious. And not just that, he has overdrafted himself"

Nabras sneered. What a word. 'Overdrafted'. He knew what that sort of thing did to people. His aunt had been killed when she overdrafted her mana. Sure it wasn't always fatal, but it was never good. His uncle had never been the same afterwards, and he didn't like to think about the incident at all. I think you should take a look at

"Now, I can assure you Gareth will be fine," continued Thyme. "I am more than capable of easing, and even curing overdraft in people. It's not exactly easy even for me, but for someone so much weaker than I am, it is no real trouble. Alas, it does mean that Gareth won't be waking up for a little while. Best let him recover properly instead of rushing things or we risk damage,"

I find that I don't believe you. Thyme, still not paying attention to Nabras' turmoil, kept speaking. "Now, before we even talk about Gareth's score, I need to emphasise that what Gareth did, is NOT a good idea. I do not encourage overdrafting. It is a really bad idea, and even though I can fix it, not many people can. It's a condition that usually results in death, or significant loss in ability. It's not too different to have a limb cut off. Potentially very dangerous, and not something everyone can heal. So AVOID IT.

"Now, I also want to make it clear that I am fast, very fast indeed. I can do things near instantly... but part of doing things near instantly involves stopping time. I cannot stop time AND heal your overdraft because my medicine and healing techniques need to move through the body to work properly. Now, please be aware. When I say that Gareth is only experience 'minor overdraft' that it's a lot like saying 'he's only missing a bit of his chest' after having a heart ripped out. Technically true, but still massively deadly,"

Nabras felt himself deflate. The look in Thyme's eyes, harsh, because it needed to be. *Oh. Oh Thyme is taking this seriously.* "So here's my warning. What Gareth did was stupid, and not something I want repeated. Technically, I can't stop you, but I want it to be clear. If Gareth had less mana when he used the glove, or was suffering from more damage, or heck, if he'd passed out further up? He could've died.

"So know this. I am obligated to let you finish your jump here. If I take you out early, that might constitute interference on my behalf and cause all sorts of political issues. On the other hand, if I take too long to treat you, you might die. If you overdraft yourself while nearly empty on mana instead of with a decent amount like Gareth? You'll probably die, and if you do this sort of shit while I'm not around? You WILL die.

"I told you all that the gloves are poorly made intentionally. This is not just a simple 'he ran out of mana and passed out'. Some teachers like to tell people that's what overdrafting is. That's not the case. No, it's when you draw more mana from your body than it has. I don't like to think about where it takes the extra mana from,"

Thyme paused there, taking in a long deep breath, then exhaling, letting their balloon-like appearance deflate a little as they did. "Now, I hope you all understand the dangers. This is meant to be a fun, light-hearted round of the tournament. I've tried rather hard to keep things safe, and to keep everyone smiling. Some people," Thyme glared at the cut-out of Gareth, "decided that pushing themselves, and going 'above and beyond' was a good idea. I do not want any deaths on my head, and I do not want people complaining about interference to save someone's life. So please, try not to be stupid about this,"

Thyme then sucked in their breath again, filling the 'balloon' chest back up, "Now, we've got to go over Gareth's time. Part of me wants to save it for later. This is the final round after all. Keep you all sweating... but I would've just announced it normally if Gareth was actually standing here, so I should do it anyway.

"But... I guess I will add a little twist," continued Thyme. "Gareth's final time, for the third jump, penalties included is nine minutes, and fifty-four seconds,"

Thyme let that hang in the air for a while. Nobody had really been counting, but that seemed like quite a few missed rings. The question was, just how many? Ten? Five? Somewhere in-between probably but Nabras knew he'd been focusing on regenerating mana... and failing.

"Now, we've got Nabras up for his jump next," said Thyme.

Oh fuck me. Can I just forfeit? Even if I don't think Thyme is some evil sadist out to cause us all pain anymore, which really was kind of a stupid thought to begin with. That doesn't mean I want to use these death traps! I mean... I could pull off a Mauve? Just blast down, barely snagging the rings on my way? It's probably not going to get me a win... but I think I blew that chance when I overused my gloves last round.

[Chapter 1248 1248 No Gloves, Mo Problems](#)

--- Nabras ---

Nabras looked down at the rings below him, knowing, pretty well in his mind, what Gareth felt. Annoyance and confusion. The rings below him really were hard to separate nicely. Planning a route through it all would be a massive pain... if Nabras hadn't already decided not to bother with anything too

complex. It was simple. Just, get as many rings as he could without using the gloves once. Simple? Hopefully.

Gareth had already shown that the first four rings could be grabbed without using the gloves. From there, it was really a question of where to go next. The ones in the South-West were just a little too far away to get to even if you started going there straight after the fourth ring. At least, in Nabras' opinion. So, Nabras would go from four, all the way to the top North-East corner where he could take the next two, then back to the middle, collecting two more sets... then... well then Nabras really wasn't sure what to do.

It looked like there might be a set of rings under the rings in the South-West, but Gareth didn't go over there, and Thyme didn't say how many rings Gareth had missed, so going after them himself might be a questionable decision. There was always the North-West as well. Even if he didn't have the mana to grab the West rings as part of that set of three, perhaps he could get all the way to the North-West in time? It was hard to say.

*Wish I had a better plan then 'do what Gareth did but worse' but honestly I don't think I'm going to find one. I certainly don't have the stones to nearly kill myself for a round of the tournament. Sorry team, but I just don't have it in me. Which well... I don't think they'd want that EITHER but I do feel like a bit of a coward now. I fucked things up for them yesterday with my boasting... and I... well really I did it again today.

I could've let my sister handle this. Not sure she could've done better. We have pretty similar mana levels... but she might have been better at working out a path through the rings, doing it conservatively. Heck, the main reason the rest of the crew let me do this was probably so I can't fuck things up on the final day.*

Nabras let out a sigh. *Guess that's just how it is.* Nabras had seen how Gareth had 'jumped' off the platform, and Nabras was going to do the same. He was so inside of his own head, he didn't even realise that he wasn't scared of the jump anymore. Gareth's overdraft, combined with Thyme's speech and even Nabras' own moment of enlightenment... the fear just wasn't important, and so Nabras fell.

Perhaps I need to think about if I'm really cut out for this team. I joined Nell on adventures with my sister all the time when we were little. It was always fun to imagine us, out together, exploring the world, battling monsters. Taking down bad guys. We've even done all of that a fair bit. It... it became a bit dull at times, but we did it! Even at a lower level, we still did it! Nabras cleared the first ring.

So how did I end up like this? When did I get so arrogant? Why didn't I see it when we lost the previous round? Why didn't I see it when we were struggling up that fucking mountain? Why didn't I notice during one of our hold-over jobs. Nabras cleared the second, third, and fourth ring.

*Blue has been carrying us through this particular round of the tournament... but how much of EVERYTHING has just been Blue taking everything out? Sure she's not normally right next to the see, and arguably the sand castle win was more of Kress' thing... but Blue did really well with Kat that one time as well... * Nabras cleared the eleventh and twelfth ring, skipping the others before them.

*Blue seems to do well in other teams. Really well. So how much of that is me? Nell's done brilliantly for herself. Sis is... normally trying to reign me in. Ellenell has kept us all together. Physically, if not

emotionally. Am I... am I cut out for this kind of life?* Ring thirteen through to sixteen were grabbed. Nabras didn't even really think about it, he just headed off towards the North-West set of rings. It might have more, it might not. He might reach it, he might not, but he didn't know what else to do. I think you should take a look at

I... I don't know what else to do. This has been my whole life. Playing at adventures when I was little. Training when I got older. Adventuring for real when I grew up. Ha. Did I ever really grow up? Then again, what's with all this 'growing up' shit. What am I? Forty? I'm still at the start of my life... Nabras saw he wasn't going to make it to those rings in the corner, and turned around. Perhaps he could get that set in the middle Gareth had aimed for.

Perhaps... perhaps its time to start properly relaxing while I'm here. Relax and... figure out if this is what I really want to do, or if this is just what I happen to fall into. The others deserve a proper team member, not an annoying relative that they can't get rid of. Nabras missed the final ring, and that's all it was, one, single ring. He couldn't find it in himself to care all that much in the end.

Welp. Should've just gone for that final ring. At least it was only one point. Feels a bit disappointing. Maybe I should've tried to be faster in other ways? I've sort of fucked this up for the team... but then again I 'sort of' fucked it up in the previous round when I wasted all my mana. So really, does it matter? Yes, no... maybe? I can't say I should've tried faster because I WAS trying. I... I still have a lot to think about I guess.

He just angled himself downwards and cleared the wooden ring at the end, bringing himself back up to the platform, facing time. With a smile that he didn't feel, he said, "Thyme, give it to me straight, what's the result,"

"Your time, penalties included, is... twelve minutes and forty-nine seconds," said Thyme.

Nabras faked a stumble and put his hands over his heart as he said "Oof, that was a little too straight there Thyme. That's not the type of score a guy wants to hear," Thyme just smiled back not commenting at all. Just smiling. Nabras smiled back for a few seconds, waiting for a response. When none was forthcoming, He started to raise just the one eyebrow. Thyme copied him... but didn't say anything. Nabras let out a long sigh.

Right... well that's not the score I was looking for. Gee, I really did miss a whole bunch of rings then didn't I? Gotta be at least ten I think. Probably more. What was Gareth's score again? Nine minutes something? Damn I'm like... a whole three or four minutes worse than Gareth! Surely I didn't do that badly? Then again... I guess I did miss a whole bunch of rings didn't I? Fourteen or fifteen? So what? Gareth missed... eight or nine? I wasn't really paying attention. I also don't really remember how many seconds Gareth 'used' for his time. Which, well I guess that is what it is.

Nabras let out a long breath of air before sitting down on the ground, ignoring the fact he dropped a bit and hurt his but. *Welp. Guess that's done. Another horrific performance for Nabras. I sort of wish I could redeem myself a bit... but I know that I don't have the chance. I really do need to talk with everyone after this. Explain what I've realised... but should I do that before or after I take the time to think about what I want to be doing in the near future?

I mean... what happens if we win this round? I don't think it's too likely, we've got tough competition and Gareth's team has a good grip on the lead, for now at least, but I just... damn could I go through another round of this? Another, harsher round of this? This is supposed to be the relaxing round dammit! Do I even want to win?*

Nabras smacked that ridiculous thought down. *Ok, just because I don't want to go on to the next round doesn't mean I should just throw in the towel. Winning would be great! Though... I guess I won't have any chances to affect that final outcome. So... guess what happens, happens. Maybe I should try and find a way to help my team out? Not sure how exactly, but it might be a nice side project while I'm having my existential crisis. Yeah. That sounds... acceptable, even if it's not exactly what I want to be doing. It's something. For now.*

[Chapter 1249 1249 Willow Away!](#)

--- Willow ---

Willow sat down on the edge, it had become her signature move so she might as well make use of it again. Plus, it was looking like it was going to pay off! She could flip down and around to get a nice bit of speed up while grabbing the first ring. That was surely something. She'd recovered a good deal of mana, with five good blasts in her. All without passing out! Her stomach was a bit sore still, but that was just a bit of pain, and perhaps torn muscles... minor internal bruising. It would be fine. Unlike the last two competitors.

Gareth... well... he'd gone above and beyond for his team and Willow could appreciate that. It... just didn't seem worth it though, not really. He probably wasn't going to get anything better than third place. She couldn't see herself or Mauve getting a time as bad as either of the first two and Cyan... had used up a good deal of mana. Probably.

Then there was Nabras. That smile at the end really didn't reach his eyes. He didn't seem... unhappy with his performance, so it had to be something else. *All this training at reading facial expressions and intentions but I've really got no idea what the heck Nabras was thinking about. Then again, it's not like we were actively engaging in conversation, or that I know the guy well. Still... seems this jump has a way of getting to people. Well NOT ME. I'm going to do AWESOME and heck, maybe even take home the win. I'll just have to do it well.

So I've got five bursts I can use. Where am I best using them? Obviously I use one to get that extra three near the start, same as Gareth. I... do I use a burst to get the final two in that set of three on the 'second layer' of things? Might be worth just going for the ones in the South-West... but there's two lots of those, one on top, one below, and nobody has actually TRIED for them yet. Can you even get them in one burst?

If not... that might not be worth it. Then again... two bursts over there instead of the one burst to get the two rings before it. I still wouldn't get the North-West ones. That's probably out of my reach. But well... hmm... I just feel like there should be a better way of doing it. I'm still going to be skipping AT LEAST four rings. Probably more. Hard to say how many are in the two lower sets. My eyes aren't good enough to

see. Then again... there are an awful lot of sets of two and three in this course. So it's probably one or the other, so four rings, or six.*

Willow let her dangling legs smack into the underside of the platform a few times, just to pass the time, see if she could come up with anything better. *I've got a bit of room to work with. I... might technically have six shots at this... but I'd really rather not risk it after that big speech time gave. So let's just stick to five. Play it back once more.

Go down, get one, two, three, four, blast across to get, five, six seven. Maybe blast across to get the next set that I think is a set of three. So that would be... one or two blasts for that. Then a big break over to the North-East corner. Which... can I make it over there without blasts? Probably not? So that's at least three of my five gone. Maybe four. Then I'd need to use it once more to claim the full set of six, going down to either nothing, or one more blast. Probably best just to go for the North West ones for that set? If I miss the final ring set in the middle... the... well it's a bit of a risk. I guess I'll just have to see which set looks like it has more rings?*

Willow flicked her wrists out a few times. *Ok. Let's do this. And focus on speed where I can.* With a cheeky salute to Thyme, Willow fell forward and down, quickly flattening herself to get as much speed as possible all the way to down the first ring. Then she starfished out, just for a moment to slow herself and turn, then off she was zipping towards the middle. One blast, and afterwards she'd collected six rings.

Willow looked over at that distant set, now clearly a set of three. Fuck it let's GO! Willow shot herself over there, wincing at the impact on her arm, because she, like a dummy, had used the same one twice in a row and it was really smarting. Didn't matter though, she was claiming three more rings in just a moment.

Another blast carried her back up towards the next set of rings. It was... serene on the way there. After the slightly rapid-fire start, it actually took her quite a while to get over there. She used the chance to study the rings, and saw that both of the 'missed' sets of rings below her contained three rings. *Eh, we'll see how it goes.*

Eleven and twelve, two more rings down. Willow had seen the others glide down to the set of three, Willow? Willow ZOOMED. She sped down through the first two, then nearly missed the two after that, but managed to correct her course well enough... before blasting up to get the final two for her set of six. One blast left to go...

And Willow unleashed it at an angle, drastically upping her speed as she went towards what was possibly the last three rings she was going to get. With the boost it wasn't hard to claim them... it was hard to turn. It took a bit of finagling but she managed it... not in time for one more ring. So instead, Willow sped downwards, hopefully, to victory.

"Good job Willow!" said Thyme. "You've got the fastest time yet, both in pure time, and after penalties. Though I won't be spoiling that just yet. For your total time it's seven minutes and five seconds, which puts you solidly in the lead!"

Nice.

--- Mauve ---I think you should take a look at

Mauve rolled her neck as she looked over the edge. Like the others before her, she saw it for the mess that it was. Unlike the others that came before her, she wasn't so worried about the past performance of the other competitors. Mauve was in the zone, and she was going to win. Mauve had enough for six blasts. Six uses of those damned gloves. One more than Willow, and that was going to buy her the win. Mauve was certain of it.

Mauve cracked her knuckles as she looked over the edge once again. *Just gotta do what Willow did... but also pick up the final ring. No way it was more than one ring, she's managed a time that's too good for it to be more than that.*

Mauve clapped her hands together, and then she jumped. It was easy to slip down and complete the first section, just as Willow had... but then came a slight mistake. Mauve was one for speed. She'd loved the speed. Treasured the speed. Embraced the speed. Perhaps, too much speed as it turned out.

Mauve was coming up on the Eleventh and Twelfth rings, and realising, with no shortage of horror. That she was going to come up short. *No! Dammit NO! I'm too close to use a blast, but if I don't I'm going to lose the rings. Curse me. I can give myself a bit of height with them, offset the fact I'm too close... but that will slow me down massively. Shit. I can probably make the second ring... barely. But that means I'm going to tie with Willow. Damn. I don't have time to decide. Pick one me!*

Mauve cursed, but did nothing. She sped through, missing one of the rings and then completing the pattern the same as Willow did. She could only hope she was faster. When it came time for the last ring, Mauve blasted towards it, and prayed. Prayed that she was faster than Willow. That she would be the winner, overall.

Mauve blinked as her feet hit the ground. "Congratulations Mauve! A bit of a different route from Willow, but a great time non-the-less, your final time is... wait for it... keep waiting..."

"JUST GIVE ME MY TIME!" shouted Mauve.

"That doesn't seem like waiting," answered Thyme. Mauve glared back at him, "Fine, your final time is six minutes, and fifty-nine seconds,"

Hahahaha YES! That means I managed to beat Willow!

Unlike Mauve who was celebrating her win, Willow was instead, trying to remember the scores for the previous rounds so that she could work out who exactly was in front after that. Thyme was looking between them with an obnoxious grin, so it was obviously close.

Cyan grimaced at this and asked "Hey Thyme, can I forfeit this final round?"

"Oh? Why is that?" asked Thyme.

Cyan shrugged, "There's only points for first and second, and I don't think I have the mana to get enough rings so..."

Thyme shrugged, "Sure, if that's how you see things I'm fine with it,"

"Thanks," confirmed Cyan with a nod.

[Chapter 1250 1250 Jumped Up Times](#)

--- Kat ---

The round was over and Thyme was still having fun with everyone. With a flick of their fingers, Thyme had transformed the room into something resembling a wake. Everyone not competing was moved onto uncomfortable folding chairs, something Kat was surprised Thyme even had, and squished too close together. Kat at least got an edge seat but it was still awkward with her wings.

There were white flowers lining the sides, and petals across the red carpet that cut through the seating arrangements. This all led to a slightly raised stage with Cyan and Nabras on one side, with black robes thrown over them. While on the other side Mauve and Willow were wearing black dresses. Thyme was slightly off to the side, in full black morning gear and a river of tears streaming down their face...

And the whole thing was ruined by Gareth in a glass coffin snoring away like a chainsaw. Thyme had to be projecting the sound to make it worse... because Green would never be able to sleep if this was standard volume during the night. It was made all the funnier by the long flower stems surrounding Gareth that would be sucked in and blown away by Gareth's breathing, making it abundantly clear, even from a distance that Gareth was still alive.

A quick glance at Green showed she wasn't surprised, at all by this set-up. It seems that when she'd disappeared from Nixilei's lap after Gareth's last jump, she'd been let in on the joke... or she'd helped set the thing up. The second was seeming more likely as Green herself started to cry rivers of tears like Thyme. The fact they were pooling at her feet and then continuing sideways, then down the aisle in a proper river really cemented it. The upwards twitching of her lips really wasn't selling the whole 'aggrieved widow thing'.

Still, all of this could've led into more jokes... if Gareth hadn't sneezed in his sleep, slamming his head against the glass coffin in the process and causing Green to burst out laughing. Tears still flowing of course. Nixilei was shoving Green away because in her fit of laughter her face was leaking all over Nixilei's outfit. "Ok, haha, really funny Green now can you stop trying to soak my pants! I'd rather not have my underwear on display thank you," grumbled Nixilei.

Which of course, was also funny, sending Kress into a fit of laughter and decidedly, not helping Green recover enough of her mental faculties to move the torrent of water coming from her face off Nixilei's legs. Kat rolled her eyes seeing this and extended her tail over, letting the spade tip catch most of the water and send it off to the side.

Well this is certainly an interesting way to start announcing the winner for this round.

[I feel like it's sort of in bad taste. Especially after we got that major talking to about how dangerous overdrafting mana is. It sounds like it's not anything like what I experienced passing out. Though... I wonder what would happen to me? I've got demonic energy in me as well and even if I can't use it normally. Might be something to ask about...]

I don't agree. If Green wasn't so clearly in on the joke, then yes it would be poor taste but Green has to at least agree with this, if not suggested it herself. Plus, you have to admit, watching those flowers move up and down like a Gareth is a sleeping cartoon character is funny

[Eh... alright]

Eventually Green did manage to get herself together and Thyme pulled off the veil they were wearing to reveal a face that looked exactly like Gareth's, if you ignored the bark texture instead of skin of course.

"That's right, I was at my own funeral!" said Thyme. "My friend Gareth here was just providing the body double. Isn't the resemblance uncanny?"

Silence greeted Thyme's words. "Right, I see I missed the timing on that one... but speaking of timing, I have the final times for everyone! I'll be going from last place, to build suspense of course. First up, or rather, last up, we have Cyan, because they forfeited the final round. I feel a little bad doing things this way, because there was a chance he could've done well... but it was a lack of mana, and inability to match the top two contenders that makes this a wise decision in the end. Give it up for Cyan!"

There was a round of claps from the audience and Thyme threw a single flower in Cyan's direction. Cyan, surprised by this nearly dropped it by years as an adventurer weren't for nothing and he managed to grab it before it hit the ground. Once the flower was caught Thyme continued to speak, "For our fourth place, and first person with a full set of three jumps under their belt... it's NABRAS give it up for Nabras with a time of nineteen minutes and forty-nine seconds!" I think you should take a look at

nOveLnext.cOm

Thyme threw out a bundle of three flowers this time, and Nabras was more ready. He caught them and gave them a quick sniff. Rather pleased with the smell. It seemed time had made sure they weren't too overpowering for his beastkin nose. Perhaps they could be a nice decoration for his room over the next few days. He was also thinking of getting them pressed and preserved, so as to not forget the realisations he'd had during this challenge.

Thyme then went on, "Nabras was held back mostly due to lack of mana, and to some extent, a lack of courage. He didn't really GO for it when the chips were down. Our top three contenders all tried to speed up their fall in what ways they could, and while their success varied they made good attempts of it. Still, Nabras has done well," Nabras shrugged at that, not sure he really did all that well. "On to our third place finisher...

"You'll find that it's Gareth here with sixteen minutes and twenty-five seconds! Please hold your applause for Gareth," Thyme paused and then looked around before continuing in a stage whisper, "He happens to be sleeping at the moment. Wouldn't want to wake the sleeping beauty aye?" Thyme switched back to their normal voice, "Gareth did well, but like Nabras was hindered by the lack of mana. It's almost a shame he was forced into a mana heavy event like this, but he has shown he has some courage and determination if nothing else.

"Not something I recommend he ever does again, lest he suffer a good spanking from me, even if I would still endeavour to save his life. Of course, if I'm not around he'll have bigger things to worry about. Green, I suggest you guilt him into being more careful." Green nodded eagerly, apparently quite willing to go along with Thyme's suggestions. "Good good. So that just means we have the top two contenders left...

"I'll do them both quickly together, then give my explanations. Second place... with a time of thirteen minutes and thirty-eight seconds, just shy of the winner by six seconds is... MAUVE," Mauve stood there

shocked, even as Thyme threw a bouquet of flowers into her face. Mauve just let it hit the ground as Thyme kept going, "That means, with a time of thirteen minutes and thirty-two seconds our winner is WILLOW!"

Thyme clicked their fingers and suddenly a massive pile of flowers dropped down over Willow covering her completely. A few rustles later and Willow pushed her way forward stepping out of the flower by. "Bleh, urgh, it's in my mouth,"

"Haha, what a show everyone!" said Thyme. That seemed to snap Mauve out of it. She frowned at the results, but picked up her bouquet and started clapping with everyone else. "Mauve and Willow both took different paths through our course here today. Each excellently leveraging their skills. Willow's planning, Mauve's boldness... yet ultimately, it was that same boldness that caused Mauve to miss a ring by just a sliver. This round really did come down to the smallest of margins TWICE. So I'm happy to be awarding them both the points for this round!"

Damn. That really was close. This might have been my favourite event to spectate as well. Sure Marigold was somewhat comedic during the Twister game, and the ping-pong matches were alright... but the rest really dragged.

[I dunno, I enjoyed watching you during dodgeball and especially log chopping.] Kat quickly saw the associated imagery from Lily watching those two events and it really had more to do with the fact Lily greatly enjoyed Kat doing sporty activities that showed off her body. Kat just sent Lily back a mental image of a raised eyebrow. [Fine. Excluding your events this one was the best.] Admitted Lily.

Kat smiled. See. It was a great round, and while I'm sure Gareth is going to get raked over the coals by Green later... I've gotta say it was entertaining. I doubt the next round will be anywhere near as cool.

[They can attack each other though...]

Yeah but you save mana by just... not attacking. Every attack or defence you use means 'more mana' for the rest of the group.