

ShadowBound 48

Chapter 48: Rankings

『There have been some changes made to Galen's character. It nothing really important, all I did was to erase the fact that he had a beard and his hair is now white with red eyes. Also has no scar.』

The woman standing at the pulpit exuded a commanding presence.

Her silver armor glimmered under the hall's light, contrasting sharply with her cold, piercing gaze that scanned the room like a hawk surveying prey.

She rested her hands on the edges of the wooden pulpit, leaning slightly forward.

"My name is Ember Everest, the head instructor for students with ice manipulation," she announced, her voice as crisp and sharp as winter air. The hall fell completely silent under the weight of her words.

She let the silence linger for a moment, her gaze sweeping across the sea of students.

"Before I begin in earnest, my fellow knights and I would like to congratulate and welcome each of you to the Dark Knight Academy." There was a brief, polite pause, though her tone was anything but soft.

"Now that you've made it here, you should know this: you stand at the threshold of a path toward greatness. But be warned—this path isn't for everyone. If you came here looking for comfort, or if you think you can coast by on talent alone, you are mistaken." Her eyes narrowed slightly as she let the words sink in.

"Here, laziness is the mark of the weak. On these grounds, mediocrity has no place. If you cannot endure the stress, if the pain of pushing past your limits terrifies you, I suggest you make peace with failure and leave now. No shame in quitting early—it saves us the trouble of weeding you out later."

The students shuffled uncomfortably, exchanging uneasy glances, but Ember continued, her voice unwavering.

"We instructors aren't interested in excuses. Complaints won't earn you respect, and whining won't win you battles. If you're not willing to suffer for progress, don't waste our time. You'll sweat, bleed, and break—but in return, you'll learn. You'll grow. And if you can endure, you'll leave here as warriors—knights worthy of the title."

Her words carried an edge that sent a chill through the hall, as if a cold wind had swept through Beacon Hall itself. Some students sat up straighter in their chairs, determination flickering in their eyes. Others looked hesitant, doubt creeping into their expressions.

Ember's gaze sharpened as if she could already see who would falter first.

"There will be moments when you question why you came. When every muscle burns and every bone aches, you'll find out what kind of person you are. And that, dear students, is the true essence of this academy. Not just power—but resolve."

She straightened, allowing her hands to rest calmly on the pulpit. "Those who dare to stay will find themselves broken down and reshaped, forged into something stronger. Those who don't? Well, the door is still open."

The tension in the room was palpable, a heavy silence hanging in the air. No one dared move or speak.

Ember's presence was suffocating, and yet, there was a strange allure in her words—a promise that beneath the grueling trials lay something worth fighting for.

"I'll end my talk here and pass the floor to Sir Galen," Ember concluded, stepping back from the pulpit with an air of relief.

The knight in question sat slouched in his chair, his disinterest palpable. He rubbed the back of his neck as if trying to shake off a nagging headache.

When his name was called, he blinked in confusion and annoyance, as if he couldn't fathom why he had to endure this duty yet again.

With a heavy sigh, he strolled casually to the pulpit, his demeanor as relaxed as someone taking a leisurely stroll through a park.

As he reached the pulpit, he leaned against it, scratching at his tousled hair in a way that suggested he might have preferred to be anywhere but there.

"Damn this academy and everyone in it," he muttered, his voice low yet loud enough to carry across the hall through the microphone.

The students exchanged nervous glances, surprised at his bluntness. Galen didn't seem to care, his expression a mix of annoyance and apathy.

"I don't know why the school insists on dragging me into this," he continued, shaking his head, his grumpy expression barely masking the bemusement in his eyes.

"It's because of you little loads of trash." His gaze swept across the crowd, his cool demeanor eliciting a mixture of indignation and fear.

"The authorities claim your generation will bring an end to the demons, but all I see is a bunch of worthless kids." He chuckled softly, a sound devoid of humor, as if the very idea amused him.

The other knights on the stage exchanged wary looks, knowing full well that none of them would dare challenge Galen's audacity.

"Honestly, the people in charge are getting old; they're starting to lose their marbles. Anyway, the real reason I'm up here is that I've got the guts to do what none of these knights can," he said, gesturing dismissively toward his colleagues.

He turned his cold gaze back to the students, a smirk on his face. "And they even tried to make our dear Ember act tough in front of you scums." He glanced at Ember, who stood rigid, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"What am I even talking about? Oh, right, your useless rankings," Galen said, sounding pleased with himself. "You all noticed your names were on your seats before you sat down, right?"

His tone dripped with sarcasm, and the students shifted in their seats, uncertainty filling the air.

"That shows what number you are ranked among your peers." He watched as whispers began to spread through the crowd, confusion mingling with frustration.

"Yeah, this is what this trashy generation does best—lose your cool at the first sign of pressure," he said, a twisted satisfaction glinting in his eyes.

"My only concern is the top ten students. The rest of you? Figure out your rankings on your own. I don't have the energy to waste on the useless."

The murmurs grew louder, but Galen's attention was already shifting. "Now, you less useless ones," he continued, his gaze landing on the first ten students seated in the front row.

"Starting with this year's top student: Sheila Granger, princess of the Crescent Kingdom." He announced, looking straight at the young woman in seat one.

She was strikingly beautiful, with long white hair cascading like a waterfall and deep blue eyes that sparkled with determination.

"Next up is Chris Rature, prince of the Tempest Kingdom." The boy in seat two beamed with pride, his classic good looks complemented by neatly styled black hair and piercing green eyes.

"Third is Charlotte Raven," Galen said, gesturing to a stunning girl with brown skin and curly hair, her provocative outfit leaving little to the imagination.

"Then we have Logan Hepten, followed by Lucian Kellor." Galen rattled off names, barely pausing between them, his tone flat and unimpressed.

"And ranked sixth is Ariana Merdin," he said, motioning to a girl with auburn hair and green eyes, wearing delicate, transparent glasses that gave her an intellectual air.

"Now, for the last four," Galen drawled, "ranked seventh is Asher Hawthorne, followed by Liam Hunter, then Dylan Wellington..." he hurriedly continued, his impatience palpable, "...and lastly, Maxwell Samson."

"Note," he added, his voice devoid of warmth, "the rankings won't stay the same. You can rise or fall, depending on your performance. Don't get too comfortable." He looked ready to leave but paused, a flicker of boredom crossing his features.

"Please take over from here, Mystica. All this talk is making me sleepy... Damn those old geezers," he grumbled as he prepared to descend the platform.

Just as he was about to step down, a voice rang out, demanding attention. "Sir Galen!" It was Sheila, standing tall, her expression a mix of authority and indignation.

"What... how may I help you, princess?" Galen responded, clearly irked.

"As the princess of the Crescent Kingdom, I demand that you show us more respect!" Sheila declared, her voice firm and unwavering. The crowd fell silent, taken aback by her boldness.

Galen turned, a mix of surprise and amusement flickering across his face. Then, without warning, he erupted into laughter, his booming voice echoing throughout the hall.

"Wow, princess, you do know how to crack me up!" he said, wiping a tear from his eye. "You royals are all the same—always trying to act like you care, but deep down, you're nothing but a bag of trash."

The tension in the room thickened, a sense of disbelief spreading through the students. Sheila's courage was met with his mockery, but she stood her ground, her determination unwavering.

"However," he continued, his mocking smirk widening, "if you truly believe I'm wrong, and you want me to treat you with respect, then you'd better land just one hit on me. Maybe then I'll consider it."

Sheila hesitated, frustration evident on her face. The challenge hung in the air, heavy and unyielding. She knew she wasn't strong enough to accept it, and with a resigned sigh, she quietly sat back down, her anger palpable.

"See?" Galen said, amusement glinting in his eyes. "That's what I thought. Try to be more like your brother. At least he doesn't pretend to be something he's not."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have places to be," he said, turning to descend the platform, his indifference palpable.

As he made his way down, the tension in the hall remained thick, the students still reeling from the encounter.

Galen's words echoed in their minds, a harsh reminder of the challenges that lay ahead. The atmosphere shifted from fear to determination as they realized they had a long, hard road ahead of them.