

## Living Shadow 137

### Chapter 137 No Escape

No more words were exchanged. In the forest now painted red by the raging inferno, smoke spread like a sinister veil, staining everything with an ominous hue. The two boys stood amid the chaos, their eyes locked, their ideals blazing just as fiercely as the flames around them. With everything on the line, they charged at each other, carrying the weight of their convictions, using them as fuel to sharpen their blades.

With a powerful swing, Xander's sword clashed against Damon's dagger in a deafening explosion of steel on steel. The impact echoed through the forest, amplified by the gravity magic that enhanced Xander's blade. But to Xander's surprise, Damon stood unmoved, his stance unbroken.

Damon shifted fluidly to the right, exploiting an opening in Xander's guard, and slashed with his other dagger. The blade cut shallowly across Xander's lower ribs, drawing blood. Xander winced and instinctively pulled back, raising his hand as he activated his spell.

"[Gravity Magic: Repulsion!]"

A shimmering field surrounded Xander, creating a force that repelled anything in its vicinity. It was a spell he had perfected in their last encounter, specifically for moments like this.

Unfazed, Damon raised his hand in a gun-like gesture.

"[Magic Bullet.]"

A flurry of shadowy projectiles shot toward Xander, each one pulsing with dark energy. However, the repulsion field absorbed the impact, deflecting the bullets harmlessly to the sides. Damon narrowed his eyes, his frustration barely visible beneath his cold demeanor.

'So, it's brute force then,' he thought.

Xander's voice cut through the tense silence.

"I don't get you, Damon. When we train, it's obvious you're weak. You can barely keep up. The only thing noteworthy about you is your swordsmanship. It's well-structured... I'd even dare say it's beautiful. But now... how? How do you have this much power? And if you can fight with a sword, why stoop to using these dirty dagger arts?"

He surged forward, slashing with his blade in a blur of motion.

"Your dagger style has no form, no technique, no beauty! It's just violence, brutality, and endless trickery—without honor!"

Damon ducked under Xander's strike, his dagger flashing upward in a quick counter aimed at Xander's head. At the last moment, however, he shifted the trajectory, pulling back slightly.

Xander skidded to a stop, his expression filled with confusion.

"I can't understand it," Xander said, his voice strained as he caught his breath. "If you have such a formal understanding of the sword, why rely on these filthy tricks?"

Damon remained silent, his hunger-enhanced aura swirling around him. The hunger of his shadow gnawed at his mind, making it harder to think clearly. He didn't care for Xander's questions.

Swordsmanship? Sure, he knew a little. His father had taught him the basics—a foundation that he had practiced to perfection. But it was never meant for combat.

His dagger arts, if it could even be called an art form, was something born from necessity. He had learned it on the streets, adapting to every situation, thriving in the chaos. It was raw, unpredictable, and exactly what he needed to survive.

"Shut up," Damon finally said, his voice cold. "You talk too much."

Without hesitation, he hurled one of his daggers at Xander. The unexpected move caught Xander off guard. Why would Damon willingly discard one of his weapons? Xander barely managed to dodge, but by the time he turned back, Damon was already upon him.

A fist collided with Xander's face, the force of the punch enhanced by Damon's [5x] skill. Xander's head snapped back as his vision blurred. Before he could recover, Damon delivered another brutal punch, followed by a knee to his diaphragm. The blow knocked the air from Xander's lungs, leaving him gasping.

'Why don't I use the sword?' Damon thought, his movements relentless.

'Why should I? My dagger arts may be dirty, but so what? They get the job done. You have no right to look down on me when you're the one losing.'

Damon's foot slammed into Xander's chest, breaking the defensive spell and sending him sprawling to the ground. Damon could have ended it then, but he didn't. He wasn't trying to eliminate Xander—he wanted to humiliate him.

As the flames crept closer, the heat and smoke made the air thick and suffocating. Damon scanned the area, his eyes landing on a flaming branch. Picking it up, he walked toward Xander, who was still struggling to regain his footing.

When Xander's eyes finally opened, his vision cleared just in time to see the fiery branch descending toward him. The heat seared his skin as the impact knocked several teeth loose. The pain was excruciating, but it was the humiliation that cut deeper.

Damon stood over him, his shadow twisting and writhing like a living entity.

He coughed, blood filling his mouth as Damon kicked his sword away and raised the burning stick he had scavenged, smashing it down on Xander's back.

"You really came here alone," Damon spat, his voice dripping with contempt. "You actually thought you could beat me..."

He smashed the stick again and again, each strike landing with a sickening crack.

Xander gritted his teeth, groaning in pain, and weakly raised his hand.

"[Wave!]"

A sudden blast of gravity magic surged outward, throwing Damon backward like a ragdoll. He crashed into a flaming tree, the impact knocking the air out of his lungs as the searing heat scorched his back. Damon coughed, groaning as he tried to recover.

Xander staggered to his feet, blood dripping down his face and staining his tattered uniform.

"Why not?" Xander sneered, his voice hoarse but laced with defiance. "You're just one person... Don't flatter yourself. Why would I need help to take you down?"

As he stood, his bracelet vibrated violently, signaling a massive influx of points. However, Damon's bracelet vibrated at the same time, the light from it illuminating his smirking face.

"It seems the others gave up," Damon said with a dark grin, brushing ash off his shoulders as he steadied himself. "You're the last one left."

Xander chuckled bitterly, swaying slightly from exhaustion.

"If you think you can have at it, knave," he replied, raising his hand with a weary smirk.

"[Weightless!]"

The ground around them shifted as all the flaming trees, shattered rubble, and debris began to levitate, floating eerily in the air. Damon's eyes narrowed, his body instinctively moving to dodge as pieces of rubble began hurtling past him. His head felt light, hunger gnawing at his mind, but he forced himself to focus.

But Xander wasn't aiming for him.

The debris surged toward the small stream nearby, slamming into it with a thunderous crash. Trees, boulders, and shattered fragments clogged the waterway, cutting it off entirely. The stream stopped flowing, its calming trickle replaced by a dam of rubble and smoke.

Xander fell to his knees, panting heavily, his chest heaving as he coughed against the toxic, smoke-filled air. Even so, he grinned like a madman.

Damon's eyes widened in shock as he looked at the ruined stream.

"What... what have you done, you fool?" he roared, his voice trembling with fury.

The stream had been Damon's fallback plan, his escape route from the inferno with his water celebration skill. It was supposed to be his sanctuary, his ace in the hole. And now, it was gone.

Xander's grin widened, blood staining his teeth as he laughed weakly.

"Hahaha... I knew it. You were planning to use that stream for something," he rasped.

He coughed again, his voice hoarse but triumphant.

"Now it doesn't matter... win or lose... I still make sure you don't get what you want."

Damon's body trembled with rage, his fists clenching so tightly his nails bit into his palms. Even with the cold detachment of Remorseless dulling his emotions, the sheer audacity of Xander's defiance lit a fire in him. He turned toward the bloodied, smirking figure before him, his shadow swirling ominously.

"I'm going to make you wish you were never born," Damon growled, his voice low and dangerous.