

## Living Shadow 140

### Chapter 140 Little Gratitude

It was during the final days of the Demon Wars, in the heart of the Ravenscroft territory. The Duke Xander's father and older brother had marched off to the front lines, leaving behind only Xander, his infant sister, and their mother to manage the domain. It was a dire time—many men had been conscripted for the war, and resources were scarce. The prices of food and everyday commodities had soared to unprecedented heights.

He remembered it vividly—he never forgot.

His mother was a kind woman, compassionate and selfless. Whatever little resources made it to their household, she personally distributed among the commoners. Despite the shortages, she tried her best to ease their suffering.

It was on one such day that she decided to take medicine, food, and what meager supplies were available to a nearby town. She refused to bring knights along, reasoning that armored men with swords would only intimidate the already distressed townsfolk. It was wartime; people lived under constant tension, and she wanted to bring them solace, not fear.

The small caravan included her and her two children: Xander, who was only seven, and his toddler sister. He remembered the destitution of the town they visited, the palpable tension in the air. As the convoy entered, he noticed the way people looked at them—not with gratitude, but with something darker. Even as a child, he could sense it.

Those were not welcoming eyes.

They stopped at the town square, hoping to distribute the resources. But with a single voice, everything unraveled.

"Down with the nobility!"

The cry erupted, and with it came chaos. The people did not meet them with thanks or relief but with fury, hate, and violence. Rocks flew, pitchforks were raised, and Molotov cocktails lit up the town.

Xander remembered the red glow of the flames and the searing heat as everything burned around them. He remembered his mother forcing his infant sister into his arms, shielding them both with her body. He remembered her blood flowing as she bore the brunt of the rioters' wrath.

The warmth of her blood. The fishy scent of it. The metallic taste that lingered in the air.

And the deafening cries of his baby sister.

But more than anything, he remembered the helplessness. How powerless he had felt.

From that day, he hated the commoners. Ungrateful wretches. He despised them with every fiber of his being. But above all, he loathed the powerlessness they had made him feel.

They survived—all three of them. Rescued just in time. The war eventually ended, and his mother, ever forgiving, held no grudges. She understood the desperation that had driven the mob to such madness.

But Xander could never forget.

Now, here he was, once again surrounded by flames and blood, feeling that same powerlessness before a commoner.

He gasped for breath, the oxygen scarce in the blazing inferno of the forest. The smoke was thick, choking him, blinding him. His body was battered and bleeding, his vision swimming from the heat and pain. Yet, when he looked up through the haze, he saw his opponent's eyes—tear-filled, his emotions raw.

Xander didn't know if the tears were from the smoke or something deeper, but those eyes held a struggle he couldn't comprehend.

His opponent stood there, unfazed by the choking air. He loomed like an unstoppable force, his body radiating a savage brutality.

And then he struck again. And again.

Each blow landed with precision and power, leaving Xander covered in his own blood. The helplessness returned, clawing at his chest, consuming him as he fell to his knees.

The noble merely watched him, his piercing gaze filled with resolve and pride. Xander gritted his teeth, forcing himself to ignore the searing pain from his broken bones and the burns scorching his flesh.

He crawled, dragging his battered body across the bloodied ground, his trembling hand reaching for the hilt of his sword. The cold steel felt heavier than ever, but he refused to let go.

"I cannot lose to a commoner..." Xander whispered, his voice hoarse yet defiant.

"I must stand proud... I am not powerless anymore."

With every ounce of his strength, he forced himself to his feet. Even with shattered legs, he stood, his body trembling violently. The jagged fragments of bone pierced his flesh, blood pooling beneath him, yet he endured. Tears streamed from his eyes, but not from weakness—it was the pain and fury of sheer willpower.

"Do you see me, Damon Grey?" he roared, his voice cracking but unwavering.

"I'm still standing... so don't you dare pity me! I'm not weak!"

His words seemed to cut through the air, reaching the boy before him. Damon froze, his eyes wide and filled with a flicker of emotion—confusion, guilt, perhaps even liberation. For a moment, the storm within Damon's gaze subsided, and he smiled faintly.

"I see you..." Damon said softly, his voice carrying a strange weight.

"You aren't weak... you are unbroken."

Xander smiled despite the agony coursing through his body. That acknowledgment, brief as it was, fueled something deep within him. Suddenly, a warmth spread through his body, a sensation both foreign and familiar. His mana grew more refined, sharper, as though it had been honed by his resolve.

Then he felt it—a distant, powerful call. The very fabric of reality seemed to shift, gravity bending around him as his soul resonated with an primordial force. The ringing in his mind grew louder, clearer, and then he understood.

It was the call of the first-class advancement.

Gripping his sword tightly, Xander raised it once more, his determination shining brighter than ever.

"Fight me," he demanded, his voice steady despite the torment wracking his body.

He knew the odds were stacked against him. Damon was faster, stronger, a monster in both physique and ruthlessness. That ridiculous magic bullet spell of his had already left Xander's body in ruins.

But Xander didn't care. If Damon was willing to embrace insanity, then so would he.

"Fine then," Xander muttered to himself, his voice shaking with both pain and resolve. "I just need to do something crazy myself."

Closing his eyes, he drew every ounce of his mana inward, compressing it into a dense field. This wasn't a defensive barrier—it was something far more dangerous. He enveloped his body in a thin veil of compressed gravity, the force distorting the air around him.

With the barrier crackling around him, he charged.

The ground beneath his feet crumbled with each step, flames and debris rippling apart in his wake. The world blurred as the pain grew unbearable, his vision reduced to a haze of red and white. But he didn't stop. He couldn't stop.

Reaching Damon, he swung his sword down with all his might. The impact sent a shockwave rippling outward, smashing into the ground and creating a small crater.

Panting heavily, Xander opened his eyes, desperate to see his opponent defeated.

But Damon was still there, standing just a few inches out of reach. The boy smiled, his calm demeanor untouched by the chaos around them.

"You missed," Damon said with a smirk. "Should've used a spear from the start."

Before Xander could react, Damon drove his dagger into Xander's chest. The pain vanished instantly as the safety bracelets activated, signaling his defeat. Xander's body began to dissolve into sparks of light, his form fading from the battlefield.

As his consciousness dimmed, he thought he heard Damon mutter something under his breath.

"Thanks... for pulling me back."

And then Xander was gone, the battlefield silent except for the crackle of flames and the faint echoes of his unyielding resolve.