

# Damon and Elena: Tumbleweeds

*Cut from **The Vampire Diaries: Shadow Souls** for space. Elena and Damon have had an argument while driving to the Gateway to the Dark Dimension. Damon has stopped the car at a crossroads, and now Elena is pacing angrily. Tumbleweeds are all around them—piled up in suspicious mounds. Elena is furious at Damon, who has scarcely spoken to her all day. She can't understand why he won't even look at her.*

Elena walked blindly to cool her cheeks until she heard Damon's voice behind her. "You're getting too close to them. There are a few tumbleweeds on this part of road, too, you know."

Elena turned around and said, with a need to reestablish control, "I'll come back if you'll call the Highway Patrol and tell them that there's something big—maybe a trapped car—under a bunch of tumbleweeds on Crantz Highway—about three or four miles west of Silverado."

To his credit, Damon didn't play around. He immediately said "All right," and pulled out his mobile.

At the same moment a car going probably the same speed Damon had been doing on Crantz flew by them on Silverado—too fast to avoid the medium-large tumbleweed that was directly in its path.

The tumbleweed must have been related to the Old Witch Grass variety Elena had heard about. Because it went BANG when the car hit it—leaping up

in fire and smoke, and then . . . it rained down thousands of tiny malach on Damon and Elena.

These malach weren't like the huge one that had attacked Matt and furrowed his arm with its sharp teeth. These were tiny, like miniature leeches, each with a mosquito-like proboscis that felt like a tiny steel drill. They made no sound except a soft pattering, like rain, as they showered all around Elena. But an instant after the tumbleweed exploded, Elena felt the first little sting on her neck. And then another sting and another—and suddenly the pain was everywhere. The jabbing of a hundred needles at once.

She had her eyes and her mouth tightly shut and her hands pressed over her face, but this meant she couldn't run. She couldn't even cry out at the pain.

“Elena! Over this way!”

Elena took a few steps and stumbled, almost falling. She could still feel new stings all over her body. The malach were small enough to hang suspended in the air, or blow with the slightest breeze. Elena's mind was going through options wildly, so fast that she felt numbed and bewildered.

“Elena! Follow my voice! Get to the car!”

Elena took a few more stumbling steps, and then stopped. She didn't want to run into another tumbleweed and set it off, and she didn't dare take her hands down or open her eyes. A malach in an open eye . . . she shuddered.

But even standing perfectly still, she felt new stings by the dozen.

*Obviously*, she needed to get to the car. But by what path?

Suddenly she jumped as she felt a hand touch her shoulder. Then she realized it was Damon. He'd come for her, despite having to walk through a cloud of malach the whole way, and with him he'd brought protection, the protection of Power. It was opened out over them like an umbrella, keeping most of the stingers off—not all, but most.

“This way,” he said, and added briefly, “It’s probably better not to open your eyes yet.”

No kidding, Elena thought, and she was grateful for his assistance as he guided her back to the car, circling tumbleweeds which were no longer stationary, according to Damon, but were rolling toward them, trying to cut them off from the car.

When they reached the vehicle, Elena realized that they'd left the front doors open. Malach had fallen inside, but fortunately not too many—the angle was wrong when that other car had hit the tumbleweed that had exploded.

Elena got in the car, clenching her teeth against the pain of the hundreds of pricks as her body made contact with the fabric of the seats. She couldn't bear to put a seatbelt on.

Damon drove slowly on Silverado.

“Where are you going? We need to get these malach out of us, fast!”

“I know. I'm looking for a turnoff, a trail into woodlands or something where we can have privacy,” Damon said.

“There is no way I’m going into a woodland of any kind, for any reason! Don’t you get it? It’s Shinichi and Misao—and they’re kitsune! They can use any kind of plant to do anything they want—”

“So what’s your idea?” Damon interrupted. “To just keep going until we find a motel, and check in as a couple of porcupines?”

“No, but there are farmhouses around here—”

“And if we ask someone to help us they may already be possessed! This is a hell of a big trap; it required a lot of planning. Would Shinichi have left the people out of his calculations?”

“I wasn’t planning on asking anyone! I was planning on finding a barn.”

“A barn?” Damon sounded bewildered.

“Or any kind of outbuilding. These are small, small farms, with hardly any people on them. At this time of day, when the cows are out grazing, there’s nobody in the barns. I know: I have two great-aunts who live on a farm. Look, there’s a driveway. Turn in there.”

Damon seemed about to object, but he followed her directions.

“Now go over *there*, and back here’s a barn. I’ll bet you anything it’s empty.”

They spilled out of the car; Elena grabbing her duffel bag and ran into the barn.

“I’ll bet you anything that if this place isn’t empty, I can kill them before they can catch us.” Damon was swinging his head around, turning toward every corner, as if he could see through farm machinery or the hayloft above.

“Don’t kill humans!” Elena was almost insane with the prickling and itching all over her body, but she had to make this clear. “Influence them, knock them out if you can’t—but *please* don’t kill them.”

“Why? You don’t know anybody here, do you? What’s it to you?”

“Damon, it’s a lot to me!” Elena had been frantically dumping out her duffel bag, trying to find a bathing suit she had thrown in at the last minute while packing. She found it—a black bikini. She felt dimly pleased by her foresight in packing it. “Now please, let me go up the ladder to the hayloft and I’ll tell you when it’s okay.”

“When *what’s* okay?”

“When it’s okay to come up!”

Damon just stared at her and Elena knew what he was thinking. Only a week ago, she had had no compunctions about standing entirely naked in front of him, and he had been the one trying to get her clothed. Only a week ago, he had massaged her body piece by piece, one arm out of a sheet at a time, until she had become boneless under his fingers, had surrendered all voluntary motion, and—

“I—I’ve changed,” she shouted to him as she kicked off her shoes and began the slow and painful trip up the ladder. “I understand the modesty taboo now, and—well, things have changed.” Please let him understand that, Elena added silently.

*Damon* had changed, too, Elena thought angrily. Although he had worked with her when it meant their joint survival, and had even protected her,

he'd made it clear that he felt nothing kindly or special toward her afterwards. He'd jerked away from her touch.

I'm not innocent and oblivious anymore, Elena thought. Which, I suppose, means I was totally clueless when I was with him back then. Elena felt a pang, not of anger, but of sorrow at having lost that innocence. She had enjoyed it, however much other people wanted to wake her up. And right now—well, she didn't know what she was going to do if Damon didn't want to touch her. How would she ever get all these malach off? She'd be possessed . . .

And she was starting to get delirious, she realized. It must be the malachs' poison affecting her already.

As Elena frantically stripped and put on the bathing suit, she did her best not to look at her body, but of course she couldn't help but see it. Hundreds of jellylike little sacs hung from her; and the tiny drills on the ends of the sacs were steadily drawing the jelly blobs closer to her body. The pain was bad enough, but the itching was absolutely maddening. She knew that if she scratched, she would only tear away the soft jelly part and leave the drill winding its way into her skin, but it was agony to keep from scratching.

"I'm dressed—*what?*"

Just as Elena began to call, she sensed something from below her. A sort of . . . disturbance. It registered in Elena's mind as an explosion, and, disregarding the pain, she dropped to her hands and knees.

*“Damon?”* Elena tried to whisper, while sending the message in a telepathic shout. *“Are you all right?”*

“I’m fine,” he said in normal conversational tones, if a bit tersely.

“I felt something—”

“It’s not enemies. You felt me using Power. Are you ready yet or not?”

Elena opened her mouth to ask more questions, then decided not to.

Apparently he was going to help her. “I’m ready.”

She heard Damon’s swift, stealthy tread on the ladder. A moment later he appeared among the bundles of hay. Elena stared.

He was dressed just as before, from black jeans to black bomber jacket, in defiance of the summer heat. But although Elena knew she’d seen malach that had pierced those jeans, they were gone now.

*“How did you get them off so fast?”*

“I told you. With Power,” he said impatiently. “I burned them all off. You sensed it yourself.”

And he must have done. Elena didn’t know what she had expected. For Damon to have come up covered in parasites, the way she was? Looking at him now, immaculate and annoyed, it was impossible to imagine.

For the first time in her life, Elena Gilbert felt ashamed of her body.

My God, I must look hideous, she thought wretchedly. Even she couldn’t bear to look at herself. And she couldn’t look at Damon’s expression, either.

She’d begun to shake with the pain and itching, though, and she couldn’t help but say, “Can you do the same thing to me?”

Damon laughed shortly. “Yes, if you don’t mind having your skin microwaved.” She looked up, knowing there were tears in her eyes and he said in a slightly different tone, “Let’s just say that vampire skin can take it, but you’d end up like a sun-dried mummy.”

“Then what am I supposed to do? How do I make them come out?”

Damon looked her over and for a moment Elena would swear that shock and dismay flashed across his face before he swept them away into expressionless stillness. “We have to unscrew the little devils,” he said, gesturing for her to come closer. “Turn them in the opposite direction they’re going in, like unwinding a screw.”

“How am I supposed to see that?” Elena’s temper, always combustible, was on the verge of explosion. If he was trying to make fun of her at this point—

“Just let me see, will you?”

The dim barn was no place to see anything, as far as Elena was concerned. But Damon took hold of one of her arms and began to scrutinize it. Then, carefully, pulling the skin around it taut with the fingers of one hand, he reached for a malach with the other hand and removed one of the tiny spines with a deft spin of thumb and forefinger.

“Did that hurt?” he asked.

“Oh . . . just a little. But it’s fine, it’s a *good* hurt—if you know what I mean. Is it really out?”



“Yes, but I’ll have to destroy them as we remove them or they’ll try to wriggle back up to us. They’re heat seekers.” Again Damon stretched the skin of Elena’s forearm, deftly spun a shaft and pulled it out. This time there was a brief flash of fire between his fingers as he finished, a puff of black smoke and the malach was gone, leaving an acrid smell. “That one *found* heat,” he said, with his most deadly smile.

Elena tried to hold herself still. She felt as if she and Damon had been having an argument that was not quite concluded. But her back was itching in a way that threatened to drive her insane and her pride was rapidly eroding.

“What’s wrong? Did I hurt you too much?”

“No,” Elena said. “But . . . oh, Damon, my back is killing me! I don’t know how they got in—”

“Straight through the material of that flimsy top of yours. They can squeeze themselves unbelievably thin.”

“—it’s just that I itch like—” Talking about it made it unbearable. She reached around to scratch at one shoulder.

“Don’t do that!” Damon snapped immediately.

“I can’t help it!”

“Don’t say that!”

“It’s *my* body!”

“Do you want to be possessed?”

“*At this point, I don’t care!*”

Damon stared at her for a long moment. Elena knew he was thinking of all the things he could say to that, but he controlled himself and said nothing. For her sake, she thought suddenly, in wonder.

Briefly and expressionlessly he said, “All right, lie down on your stomach.”

When Elena obeyed she felt Damon start slightly. She couldn’t help saying, “Oh, God, they’re all over my back, aren’t they?”

No answer. But then Damon began working on her very rapidly, scarcely seeming to unscrew the malach so much as to pluck them out. Elena could tell he was working as quickly as he could. It hurt more, but—like scratching an itch—the pain, in some strange way, felt good.

It was like being de-ticked, Elena decided. First was the nearly unbearable itching and swelling and pain that went with having just one of these horrible things burrowing into you. Then there was the slight relief of having the skin around it stretched, and then the quick hot flare of pain as Damon grasped it and flicked it out, and finally the relief of having the steel splinter gone and warm blood flowing instead, cleansing the wound, easing the swelling.

“Will they leave scars?” she asked, feeling helpless and useless.

“Who knows?”

“I wonder whether any got into that car that ran over the tumbleweed?”

“Who cares?”

Each brusque answer pushed Elena closer to tears. Finally, she stopped talking completely. She had no idea why he was helping her if, as she had guessed, he was tired of her and the problems she seemed to bring along with her as a human. She shut her eyes and let him do what he could to keep her from becoming a pawn of Shinichi.

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Damon was doing his best to construct walls inside himself, walls that would help him with what he was doing. There was no way, he thought, that he couldn't look as dutifully as possible, poring over the creamy skin with the delicate rose bloom with Power channeled to his vision as if he were looking at it a magnifying glass. There was no way to avoid touching Elena either, and every time he touched her he felt a shock of electricity up his arm. Worst of all, there was no way to stop each tiny wound from bleeding, from cleansing itself from any bits of foreign matter left inside. But the blood . . .

Ah, yes, the blood.

No vampire could get away from a situation like this without sighing over the blood. Blood was everything—and the only thing—a vampire needed. Blood was meat and drink, rest and refreshment and Power.

And Elena's blood was unique.

Damon could see her blood now, a little red ruby for each malach he'd removed, each one the catching light from a crack in the barn's wooden roof and glinting to his dark-adjusted eyes. He could hear the blood, or at least he could hear Elena's heartbeat, slowing and becoming more steady as she

relaxed, trusting him, and then speeding up again as she worried, pumping hard enough to burst a ruby and cause it to flow down the side of her back.

And he could smell the blood and taste Elena's aura in the smell, since her aura was merely the advertisement of the life-force in her blood.

That was what was really driving him stark, staring, raving mad.

The combined smell of all those little rubies was, to his vampire nostrils, like golden frankincense, like musk and jasmine: heady, warm, as complex as Tolu balsam with its sweetness of cinnamon and vanilla; and as simple as the freshness of a newly picked wild rose. It was torture to go on doing this, each twist of his fingers releasing another drop, another note in the symphony of fragrance. He would twist and unexpectedly come up against the smell of juniper or copal, all the balmier and sweeter for the sharp scent of burned malach that came between each one; resetting him, as it were, for a new bombardment, like a gourmet eating sherbet between courses. A deep note of earthy ambergris, a fragrant, light tinge of orange blossom . . .

It was so enthralling, such exquisite torture, that when he finally heard Elena, it was clear that she had already spoken several times.

*"Damon!"*

"What? Yes? I've been concentrating."

"I could tell," she said, but there was nothing in her voice that indicated she understood what he had been concentrating on. Elena was using the quiet, well-controlled voice she affected when she herself was in turmoil. The voice she'd used ever since she'd tried to hug him in the car, wild with

excitement because they'd made it past the tumbleweeds—and he had pried her arms away with stiff fingers.

Since he had pried her arms away—because he had so nearly kissed her.

Damon allowed his mind to split, with one half listening to Elena's voice, the voice that still had the slow honeysuckle drawl it had acquired on her vacation in the afterlife, while the other half drifted off into his private fantasies

Ye gods, but the girl was priceless.

And here he was, taking her toward the Dark Dimension, a danger that she couldn't possibly measure or understand by her past experiences. All right, so with Shinichi and Misao she had gotten on the bad side of some rather nasty people. Nothing she had learned from those encounters could prepare her for a world which roasted its own children, a world where there was *no* good to compare against the blackest evil, only lighter and darker shades of ebony.

A world which even Damon had avoided, rationalizing that from the rumors he had heard it was backward and violent and that the humans enslaved there were tough and scrawny and devoid of vibrant life force.

“Damon, I think I've gotten them off my arms, but they keep crawling out of the pail,” Elena said patiently.

The half of Damon's mind that was tuned in to Elena's voice moved his eyes to a rusty pail which must have been within Elena's reach, because she had it on its side and had been throwing the malach into it, only to have them inch, earthworm-like, back toward her. She'd been hurting her soft fingers,

twisting the steely spines out of her skin, and now her arms glinted with rubies as well as her back.

“Good job,” Damon said softly, absently. “Keep your hands away from the bucket now.”

Elena pulled both hands back and propped herself on her elbows.

Damon directed a strafe of Power into the bucket. The malach inside turned into ash. Smoke trickled out of rusty rim.

“Thank you,” Elena said. “How’s my back?”

Exquisite, thought Damon. A pattern of jewels from neck to hips, most of them dried by now, a few gently trickling down into the mysterious area covered by her bathing suit.

“Stay like that,” Damon ordered, hearing the dispassion in his own voice. “Only a few more right here.” He knew that his composition in fragrant ruby would soon be ruined, but he plucked off the last few malach above Elena’s bathing suit bottoms as swiftly and deftly as he could.

“And don’t scratch,” he told her as she immediately reached around with one hand to feel the little hemispheres of dried blood. He didn’t really think that it could affect the malachs’ poison one way or another, but it was best to be safe. Puncture wounds could be dangerous.

“I didn’t get so many on my legs or my front,” she said as she sat up, her voice as carefully dispassionate as his: Elena the Ice Princess. Then a wrinkle appeared on her perfectly controlled brow. “Did I?”

“No, but they’ve had more time to burrow in. Stand up, please, and try to unscrew all you can reach while I do your legs. I can do it more quickly than you can,” Damon said, still rigidly polite.

Elena blushed. Damon had forgotten how charming she looked with the color coming up from her bosom and flooding her throat and her cheeks with rose. It was the true blush of the natural blond. What a pity, though, that since he’d last seen so much of her lovely body, she had learned to blush because of it.

Before either of them could say a word, Damon reached out and began to dexterously pull the malach off her long, slender legs, his fingers almost a blur as he moved from flesh to pail. Now she’s going to ask why I didn’t do the first ones this quickly, Damon thought, but Elena asked nothing. She simply seemed to be enormously relieved to get the things off of her, twirling off any she could reach and throwing them into the bucket with shudders of revulsion.

“We need to find a motel tonight. I’m dying for a long, hot bubble bath. I *need* one. And as soon as you finish me, you’d better do that Power thing to yourself again,” she said, not bossily, not even seeming to take control. That was the thing about Elena—or one of the things about her—Damon thought, appreciatively rather than otherwise. Even when giving orders she did it with such an air of dignity, of natural leadership, that no one questioned her.

Except, he thought, for someone like him. Damon questioned everything.

But he went along with his princess's plan because it was the *best* plan—another thing Elena had going for her; she usually managed to make her plans the most expedient and efficient, so that *not* going along with them made you an obstacle to progress.

He understood Elena's need for ritual cleansing. These parasites were disturbing at some primal level. Even if they hadn't been dangerous, they were simply hideous.

Damon also took Elena's suggestion and sent a burst of Power all over his skin, to the distance of two centimeters inside and outside. That should eliminate any malach that had penetrated him, he told himself.

It wasn't for his sake only. If he had missed just one, it would grow and grow, attach itself to his spine, feather out along his nervous system . . . until he became a helpless puppet again—and a deadly menace to Elena.

Elena said nothing about the second burst of Power, but she glanced over at him anxiously. "Are you sure there aren't any in your hair or inside your clothes? I'll turn around—"

"You don't need to. I'm positive."

Elena was running anxious hands through her own hair, old gold in this twilight, feeling over her skull. She had held up remarkably well under what Damon knew had been a hideous strain for her, and he felt the quick, fierce surge of pride that he always did when his princess proved herself.

"How can I know if one drilled all the way into my skin before we could get it?" she asked in a low voice that was not quite steady.



“You can’t. But I can. Just stand there; I’ll look.” Damon sent Power to his eyes and looked at her as if through night field glasses—with a little psychedelic psychosis mixed in. He could see her lovely heart pumping away, sending her sweet blood through her exquisite body; he could see all her organs, everything belonging to her, everything working smoothly together in its proper order—except . . . *there*.

Sharply, he began, “There’s one burrowing in under your bikini top, on your left—”

“I know!” Elena interrupted. With her back turned to him, she was wrestling with something under her skimpy top. “I’ve been waiting to get it—there.” She tossed the malach into the bucket and Damon blasted it.

“That’s all,” Damon said. “You’re clean. Let’s go.”

“All right, but I need a minute to change my clothes back. And—Damon?”

“What?” He made his voice harsh and impatient because he didn’t know if he could stand much more of this: Elena’s lovely body cleansed and sweet and her face so sad, her eyes so lost. Lost because she thought he hated her. Because he was being the world’s biggest bastard to her.

And he didn’t know how long he could mask the fire with ice. At any moment, he felt that he might break down, snatch her into his arms and rain kisses on her. Or stroke her cheek gently as he slowly bent to taste her lips. Or even possibly sling her over his shoulder and take her to the quietest, dimmest part of the hayloft.

He wanted her blood. But that wasn't all he wanted. He didn't want an unwilling or Influenced partner. He wanted the golden glow of Elena's love to shine for *him*. He wanted to look down and see that special look in Elena's eyes; the one that she gave to Stefan for the smallest things—or for no reason at all.

And if Stefan weren't in the picture, he thought that he might be able to get it. Damon wasn't vain; he was simply practical. Girls liked him. If there were no Stefan, Elena would like him—would . . . love . . . him. But here he was, on a quest to get Stefan back. True, he was proceeding in the most roundabout fashion that he could—and not just to throw pursuers off their trail—but eventually he *would* get to the Dark Dimension. And that hideous place wasn't where he wanted to take Elena at all.

But if he refused, Elena would genuinely hate him. Or she might not even waste her time hating him, but simply go straight to whatever Plan B that was percolating in the busy little mind behind those malachite-blue eyes.

He wanted her to want him. But if she wouldn't of her own accord . . . frankly, Damon was frightened. Of what he might do if the feelings inside him got too strong, Of what he might take that Elena didn't want to give.

"You can turn around. I'm ready now," Elena said in the quiet, carefully controlled voice she used for him ever since he'd jerked away from her touch in the car. He turned, and saw that her eyes were wet but also carefully expressionless. Because she thought he didn't like her. Because she had wanted to be friends, and he had pushed her away.

As ironically as possible, he gestured to the ladder that was the way out of the hayloft. He noted that Elena was wearing her thickest clothes, garments that covered her up from throat to heels against enemies—or cold-blooded allies.

They reached the car and, after Damon had burned the stray malach on the seats and floor mats to ash, got in. They buckled up carefully, using the greatest caution to avoid touching each other by mistake. Then Damon swung the car around savagely, taking his anger out on the gravel road. He swung out onto the cross street and drove like a madman, as if he could leave behind everything he had seen and heard and felt back at the barn. It was many, many miles before Elena spoke.

“I don’t suppose,” she said unsteadily, “that we could really sleep at a motel—just for tonight?”

“A motel?” Damon repeated blankly, and then he thought. The two of them . . . *just* the two of them, together, with all of his magical do-not-disturb wards on the outside, and them both inside. Elena, full of stress and nervous energy, her aura pulsing with her tension, her blood singing. She’d forgotten to be afraid of him lately. Maybe it was time to show her why she had been before.

Suddenly Damon realized that he was smiling brilliantly. Dazzlingly. Madly, in fact. He stopped it and said, “Why not? After all—why the hell not?”

*The beginning of a legendary night . . .*