2012 : Hint of Fear

The Lord of Shadows was faltering.

It was hard to notice due to his fearsome appearance and the aura of cold arrogance emanating from the strangely graceful figure of the tenebrous colossus, but the mercenary Saint was losing ground.

Already, his right hand was missing.

Silent Stalker's arrow had pierced his onyx chest, and Beastmaster had poisoned his mind. Of course, the Lord of Shadows was too strong to be entranced by her power quickly... but his movements had slowed down, losing some of their deadly precision.

Lonesome Howl could see it clearly, so she went for the kill.

...If that strange Transcendent form of his could even be killed like a living being. It bled darkness instead of blood, and was capable of splitting itself in half to avoid a blow. She had never seen anything like it.

Of course, that was entirely the problem with the Lord of Shadows – no one seemed to know anything about him, including the true extent of his abilities.

Clan Song had compiled an extensive database on all the living Saints - Clan Valor had as well, without a doubt. There were some secrets still kept hidden by the more cautious of the Transcendent champions, of course, but each of them was mostly a known existence.

Except for the Lord of Shadows, who had come out of nowhere about a year ago.

There was some information about him now, of course, gathered during the war. For example, they knew that his Transcendent form was not really that of an onyx giant rather, it was a malleable mass of shadows that could seemingly take any form, the giant simply being the most common one he used.

A troublesome Transformation, to say the least...

But not an indestructible one.

‘He might not bleed, but does he feel pain?’

Lonesome Howl was eager to find out.

The Lord of Shadows was on the back foot, staggered by her sister's sharp arrow. Sadly, Silence failed to destroy the supposed core of the dark colossus, but she still made him sway.

That was Howl's chance to press the advantage.

Spitting out the torn hand of the enemy, she aimed for his throat and leaped...

However, she never managed to sink her fangs into his flesh.

‘Wha…’

Suddenly, she felt something cold and alien wrapping around her snout, and then, her vision was obscured. Instead of ripping the enemy's throat open, Lonesome Howl crashed into something hard, and was then unceremoniously tossed aside.

Falling to the ground with a thunderous boom, she rolled and clawed at her face, trying to get the slithering presence off... before her eyes were pierced and destroyed.

Thank the gods, she managed.

With her vision blurry, Lonesome Howl looked down and recoiled.

A mass of dark tentacles had latched onto her neck, just below the jaw, three of them strangling her while four more extended to wrap themselves around her snout and loop around her head, thus covering her eyes.

At the center of the mass... the broken plates of polished armor could still be seen, serving as the source of the revolting creature.

The gauntlet.

This vile thing had been born from the severed hand of the Lord of Shadows, and was either an extension of him or being controlled by him.

‘What... what the hell is he…’

She had hunted down and feasted on numerous Nightmare Creatures. But this... this was not something she had expected from a human...

If the Lord of Shadows even was a human.

Shuddering, Lonesome Howl allowed herself a split second of hesitation to figure out how to get rid of the seven dark tentacles and their source. Sadly, while her Transcendent form was both swift and powerful, it lacked opposable thumbs and nimble arms – so, she could not even reach it.

None of the Aspect Abilities would be of use, either.

Of course, there were plenty of ways to try and damage the... the thing... but Lonesome Howl chose the simplest method to break free.

She dismissed her Transcendent Ability and turned back into a human.

A moment later, she was laying on the ground.

And a moment after that, the remains of the onyx gauntlet and the wriggling mass of shadows growing from within it crashed into the ground several meters away, towering above her like a hill.

Growling, Lonesome Howl lunged forward and pierced the heart of the dark mass like a cannonball, ripping the vile creature apart with her bare hands.

It offered little resistance, dissolving into a torrent of darkness and breaking apart under her violent assault. The onyx shards rained onto the blood-soaked surface of the ancient bone with a deafening noise.

Landing gracefully on the ground dozens of meters away, Lonesome Howl fell on all fours and activated her Transcendent Ability once again.

At the same time, she threw a glance at the Lord of Shadows... and shivered.

Out there, in front of her, Siord and the Saint of Sorrow finally delivered their first attack.

Plummeting from a great height as great a height as was safe to ascend to here in Godgrave - both delivered terrible blows, which were assisted both by their tremendous acceleration and gravity.

Siord tossed a bronze javelin down, while the Saint of Sorrow simply used his stone body as a missile.

It was as though the Lord of Shadows had known of their attack in advance. Even slowed down by Bin's mind attack, he moved his towering body just far enough to avoid the mighty gargoyle, as if performing a step of a dance.

As for the javelin...

He simply raised his face to the sky, allowing that dreadful mask of his to receive the blow of the javelin.

There was a flash, and then a devastating roll of thunder. For a moment, it seemed as if the entire world was drowned out by pure whiteness, and as a violent tremor ran through the battlefield, a pillar of flame rose into the sky.

When the flash subsided, though...

The polished black surface of the wooden mask was whole and unblemished, without even a scratch on it, as if it was far more durable than even the fearsome onyx armor the mercenary Saint wore...

And Lonesome Howl could attest that it was one of the most resilient Memories she had ever seen. After all, she pierced it with her own fangs... nothing had been able to survive her bite before, but the onyx armor nearly did.

Her transformation was complete.

Ceres had already picked herself up from the ground, blood flowing from her three mouths.

Jack was already on his feet again, wrath and resentment smoldering in his bestial eyes.

They were all ready to attack again...

Bin, Silence, Jack, Ceres, Siord, Sorrow, and Howl herself.

Both sides had sustained some damage, but they were burning with the desire to continue.

Lonesome Howl let out a threatening growl.

‘How are you going to fight seven of us with one arm, sellsword?’

And as she looked up...

A low, reverberating, chilling laughter resounded from beneath the terrifying black mask.

Then, it turned even lower, resembling the voice of an actual demon.

The figure of the beautiful onyx colossus suddenly shrunk a little, becoming a few meters lower.

At the same time, it changed, shifting into something far more bestial.

Black horns rose from his head like a crown, glistening darkly in the blinding light of the radiant sky. A long tail with an onyx spike on its end whipped through the air. His knee joints seemed to reverse, and his feet grew, enormous claws scratching against the ancient bone.

Most importantly of all...

His severed hand seemed to regrow, and two more arms shot from his torso, each covered by the onyx carapace of the enchanted armor and ending with sharp claws.

A few moments later, a towering, terrifying dark demon was standing on the battlefield instead of a colossal human warrior…

One with six horns and four arms, the eerie mask hiding his inhuman features.

Looking at it, Lonesome Howl felt a bit of... unease.

Dejection, even.

And a tiny spark of fear.

‘How... how do we even destroy this thing?’