

Shadow Stalkers: Earth Shaper

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Chapter 1 - Storm	2
Chapter 2 - Plea	5
Chapter 3 - Investigation	7
Chapter 4 - Earth Shaper	9
Chapter 5 - Angel Hunt	11
Chapter 6 - Stalo	13
Chapter 7 - Lock Down	15
Chapter 8 - The Hive	17
Chapter 9 - Distractions	19
Chapter 10 - Orbital	21
Chapter 11 - Earth Shaper	23
Chapter 12 - Final Strike	25
Chapter 13 - Victory	27

1 - Storm

Murc jolted awake with a snort as the small red light above his head flashed and beeped loudly.

"What is it?" He grunted.

"Sir, we've got a problem." Said a shaky female voice.

"I'll be right up Lieutenant." He sighed, rubbing at his eyes and clicked the com off before pulling himself out of bed.

He stepped onto the bridge and surveyed the scene. Some members of the bridge crew were working feverishly at their consoles, their paws and hands quickly skittering across the touch screens and controls, the sound of their voices a near pleading as they attempted to contact the crew members who were outside, patrolling the Shadow Stalker's space territory and the planetside base. The rest of the bridge crew were staring out of the surrounding windows and the main viewer in terror, watching the large lumps of space rock drifting towards them.

"What the hell happened?" The grey Husky demanded.

No one listened or even noticed him. He cursed himself for leaving a group of rookies in charge while he took a few hours rest. He should've seen this coming. Something always went wrong when he tried getting any amount of rest.

"Lieutenant Carrock!" He barked sharply. "What is going on?" He demanded, his temper rising.

A small, blue feathered Phoenix with icy blue eyes scuttled towards him and saluted sharply.

"Sir, the T'raykes have attacked us. They sent a remote controlled ship full of explosives into the asteroid belt surrounding us." She said quickly. "And we can't contact anyone outside the station. We keep losing signal."

Murc looked at her and she shrank back.

"Telepathy?"

She shook her head. "We lost three of our finest, sir. Something's stopping all our means of communication."

Murc tried hard not to gape. "What? How?"

"Doctor Lane says they suffered some kind of mental shock that shut down their brains, but even she's not a hundred percent sure."

Murc turned his watchful eyes to the bridge crew.

"Everyone back to your posts and listen!" He shouted angrily.

Everyone looked at him, eyes wide with fear.

"Bring the weapons online and put as much power into the shields as possible."

There was a brief chorus of "Yessir" and Murc sat down in the command chair.

"Tech department." Said a gruff, male voice over the com.

"Get me contact with General Newark in whatever way you can." He growled and closed the link before the head technician could reply.

"Should I dispatch the remaining warships, sir?" Carrock asked.
Murc nodded. "Send half the remaining fleet out. See if they can knock out or destroy some of the asteroids."
Carrock nodded, saluted and quick marched off the bridge.

"I still say he needs to get laid."
A chuckle of agreement rippled around the Eclipse's bridge.
"Now you know as well as the rest of us do, that Murc's married to his work." Captain Blacktip said to Sergeant Ferrihnoh.

"I reckon he's sweet on that Lieutenant Carrock." The black Ferret said slyly.
"I would never have thought that the word Sweet would ever be associated with Murc." The pilot said, turning around in his seat as the auto pilot light came on.

"The day he gets laid, is the day Hell freezes over. And no, I'm pretty sure Captain D'Armeus isn't willing to give out the current temperature in Hell." Blacktip said when the Pheasant opened his mouth, willing images of Murc and Carrock out of his mind.
"What's our ETA, Lossnah?" He asked the Pheasant, hoping to change the subject.
"Ten minutes, sir." He replied, turning back in his seat.

Blacktip sighed and rubbed his eyes. The past couple of weeks had been long and boring due to the amount of traffic passing through the outskirts of Shadow space had reduced dramatically, lessening the chances of pirate activity in the area.
Which is a good thing. Blacktip thought. But it's fracking boring without the damn rogues to stir up trouble.

There hadn't been a distress signal or a mayday for days. It used to be at least once a day, when a pirate would try his luck with a slow moving freighter.
"Captain?" Ferrihnoh said.
"Problem?" He replied automatically.
"Yessir. A bloody big one too. We can't get through to the station or Nuam. The signal's been blocked by an outside source."
"Bring us out of hyperspace and keep trying to contact them."
The hazy blur of the slipstream evaporated around the warship as The Eclipse came into far orbit of the Station.

"Raise the shields and heat the weapons!" Blacktip snapped, his husky voice edged with panic.
He saw five more warships and several fighters moving about the mass of debris, trying to knock them off course and away from the Station and the planet/ The Station's defenses flared violently as it too tried to fend off the rogue lumps of rock with it's own weapons, but failing.
"Take us in Lossnah." He said and opened up a com link. "Chief Evick?"
"Sir?" Said a low, femmenine voice.

"I want as much power as you can spare put into the weapons and shields."
"Sir." She said and signed off without question.
The ship shuddered as a powerful shot was released from one of it's plasma cannons, hitting one of the

larger asteroids away from the Station and the planet below.

One of the other warships turned hard and fired on a wandering asteroid, missing it by a scant few yards. Blacktip watched in horror as it collided with the Station head. The lump of rock wasn't very big, but it was enough to do serious damage to parts of the lower decks.

Oh, shoot. He thought. Rochalle's on the Station.

"Bring us in closer to the station." He ordered as the asteroids were beaten back and destroyed. The Eclipse edged in closer, its shields flaring as debris hit it.

2 - Plea

The remaining asteroids had been knocked off course, leaving behind a mass of debris. Two ships had been badly damaged and one lost. The Station had suffered a single hit when its shields failed, but the communications were back online so calls were going back and forth.

Panicked voices and shouts echoed through the damaged docking bay. Blacktip weaved his way through the debris, knowing exactly who he was looking for and where to find her.

A loose cable hung in front of the door, sparking wildly. Blacktip quickly and carefully knocked it out of the way and darted into the room before it swung back.

"Rochalle?" He called into the dark room.

"I'm over here." Grunted a soft voice.

Blacktip made his way across the small cargo bay and into a cubby hole dimly lit by a red security light.

"Chelle, are you alright?" He asked worriedly as he knelt next to her, mentally kicking himself for asking such a stupid question.

"Yeah, I'm fine. We both are." She replied, placing a webbed hand on her swollen stomach. "Now go and help your crew. I can handle myself."

He brushed a sticky red tendril of hair away from her face and helped her up.

"Emergency power cells back online." Kieron's voice said over the com.

"Let's get the hell out of here then." JD said.

"BNo thanks then?"

Jd stayed silent.

"Thought not." Kieron finished and the com clicked off.

"Stop pacing, you're making me dizzy." Spirit said, looking up from her console.

"We haven't been able to contact base for over two hours now. What the frack's wrong?" He grunted angrily.

Spirit was about to say something when a smooth male voice came down from the cockpit.

"Technical difficulties." Chester said. "It's all coming back online now, but it appears that side mission may have cost us."

"How d'you mean?" The Demon snapped.

"The station's been hit by an asteroid shower. Murc's saying it was an attack." Chester replied, trying to keep his cool as he peeked through the square hatch and down into the bridge.

"By who?"

Chester shrugged. The officer Shadow spoke to said it was the T'raykes, but we won't know more until we get back.

"Then get us back as quick as possible." JD said and flopped back into his chair.

General Newark sat at his desk, sifting through the data that had been sent to him as soon as the communications went back online. The data mainly consisted of damage reports from each deck on the Station. He'd just finished reading Station Captain Murc's report containing the all together amount of

damage, how long it would take to repair and also his own reasons for the possible sudden attack. Newark rubbed the bridge of his nose and took a sip of his water, which had gone warm in the intervening hours.

His desk comp beeped again, signalling a new data file. He sighed heavily and opened it. The Stalkers team had been planetside now for two hours and were busying themselves with whatever repair work they could do. JD, the Stalker's captain had quickly compiled his data and sent it as soon as he could. The report included why the specialist team had been delayed; they'd picked up a distress signal from a space freighter and found that it had been stolen, the original crew slaughtered. The pirate's plan was to lure in another ship and capture it. A fire fight had broken out and JD and his team mates had won. The details of the freighter had been taken so Newark made a note to inform the lost ship's company of its destruction.

There was no evidence in any of the data that someone in the Shadow Stalkers had any idea this attack was coming and for the next couple of months the base was on high alert, using every available resource to monitor the T'rayke's home system closely for any sign of another attack. The silence made everyone uneasy. No inhabited system should be so quiet. Newark thought as he studied the readings.

Everything was quiet until captain Murc received a recorded vid from the T'raykes. Everyone on the bridge watched it on the main viewer in silent shock.

"They're asking us for help...?" Murc said, feeling slightly amused by the plea.

Everyone remained quiet.

"Send it to the general. He needs to know about this immediately." He added.

"They have destroyed a large number of our forces. Our cities have been reduced to smoking debris and what little man power we do have left isn't enough to stop them. What they have on their side is.. Is..." The dishevelled Wasp sighed, an air of defeat about him. "We don't have the resources to bring it down. Please, help us!" He said hurriedly and the screen flickered angrily at an explosion in the back ground before going blank.

"Bring it down...?" The old Bear murmured to himself.

He opened a com line and summoned Captains Murc, JD and Blacktip to his planetside office for a meeting. The only way to handle this, he thought to himself as the com clicked off, is to answer their call. The state of the Wasp and the explosions caught on the vid were enough to beat back any rising suspicion of a trap. But he still wasn't sure.

Blacktip, JD and Murc filed into Newark's office, stood beside each other and saluted. The general motioned for them to sit down, and they did so, pulling up a leather chair each and sat in silence, waiting for the Bear to start.

3 - Investigation

JD and Blacktip watched the mayday in disbelief. Murc had seen this before, so he sat calmly, his expression blank. When the screen went dark, they turned to General Newark.

"If they're asking for help, why attack us?" JD asked, breaking the silence.

"Maybe it was the only way to get our attention." Murc said.

"Then why the signal barrier?" Blacktip asked.

General Newark shook his head. "I don't know. That's something we'll have to ask them about. We've been monitoring them as closely as we can in the past two months and something's very wrong on their planet."

"Ask them?" Blacktip sputtered.

The old Bear nodded "Captain D'Armeus." He said, turning to the Demon. "I want you and Shadow to go down to Stalo and investigate further. With the readings we're getting off the planet itself, it would be best if you didn't dawdle. Get the information and return to base."

"No wonder they asked for help." Lemur said as she studied the main screen of her console. "At least three quarters of the insectoid life has been wiped out by what appears to be some kind of Humanoid race and... Something else..."

"Something else?" JD asked curiously.

Lemur nodded. "Something big." She said when the readings she was receiving from the planet's surface spiked violently. "It's not mechanical. It's something to do with the planet itself, I think."

"Like what?"

"A Troll?" Shadow said as she walked onto the bridge. "They're rare, but I have come across one before."

JD paused a moment, then nodded grimly.

"Do they know we're coming?" Came Chester's voice from the cockpit hatch.

"I honestly have no idea. Guess we'll find out when we get there." JD replied.

"That's comforting to know." Shadow said.

"Two beings have materialised in sector A-five. Different species, but both armed, one more heavily armed than the other." The female Grasshopper said.

The Wasp peered at the monitor and sighed. "Send an escort drone out and bring them into the Hive. I'll be waiting for them in meeting room D." He said and strode off.

He was anxious about this meeting. What made his gut twist more was childhood memories was war stories his grandfather and history teachers had told him about the battle between the Shadow Stalkers and the T'raykes.

The T'raykes had taken the Shadow Stalkers by surprise and had crushed them. Only a handful had survived and they fled to a new system where they'd rebuilt and carried on. One of those survivors was now in charge. He had no idea why they attacked the Shadow Stalkers, no one would say. He wondered what his elders would say about his decision to contact them and beg for their help in a fight against a

weaker species three galaxies away. But they weren't weak. They had that creature on their side. The monster that was born of the earth, that rose from the ground each day to wreak havoc upon those of insectoid origins that dare to stray outside the outer Hive wall.

He was now stood at the head of the long polished table, his thoughts and memories colliding. If his family was still alive in the lower levels of the Hive and the Shadow Stalkers agreed to help, then he would be disowned.

Damn stubborn traditions. He thought bitterly then cursed the elders. The dark honey coloured door opened, pulling him from his thought and a black and red feline like creature cautiously walked in, followed closely by a dark blue Dragon, unafraid of showing her scars as if to be a warning to others, her features locked in an uncaring expression.

The Feline, the captain, stood at the bottom of the table and briefly saluted, anger and curiosity mixing in his eyes. The Dragon just gave the merest of bows and avoided eye contact. The Wasp gave a weak smile, a lump of dread clogging his throat.

"That message you sent out didn't exactly give us enough details." The Feline said pointedly, his tone cold.

"I'm sorry captain, but I would've said more if we weren't under attack." He swallowed hard and gestured for them to sit. "Several years ago," He continued when they said nothing. "I worked as a communications technician on the top level."

"What does that have to do with us being here?" The Dragon said, her northern accent tinged with impatience and suspicion.

The Wasp paused, inhaling deeply and steadily. "We got word that one of your people managed to successfully destroy an Earth Troll." He managed to say, desperately hoping it was true and not just a rumour.

For the first time since they'd arrived, Shadow made eye contact. She looked commander Locane dead in the eye for a second before continuing to look at a point just to the side of his head. The Wasp tried to suppress a shudder.

"I had help from an outsider who was also looking to destroy it. The Troll had apparently destroyed his people before moving onto one of the largest cities on Tenret, which I'm sure you know, is not far from here." She said, her expression and tone not changing.

4 - Earth Shaper

An hour into the meeting and alarms started going off, screaming their warnings all over the Hive, triggering fast paced boot-falls and shouting, orders being given out by officers. Commander Locane's hard features shifted back to worry, bordering panic.

"It's risen again." The Wasp said, standing up, heading towards the dark honey coloured door. "You will be escorted to one of the safe rooms within the lower levels."

"If you're asking for our help, we need to see for our selves what we'll be dealing with." JD said, standing up also, Shadow following suit as Locane looked from the Demon then to the Dragon, nodding quickly.

"Follow me." He said, his cap with it's hard, polished bill shining dully in the flickering light as the Hive vibrated angrily.

The Hive shuddered violently as they quickly moved down a maze of honey combed corridors and emerged into a large operations room in the now familiar Bee-hive styling as the meeting room and corridors they'd just navigated, a mass of Insectoid bodies bustling about, shouting orders, reading out information for the superior officers as they moved from console to console, trying to defend the Hive. Locane led the two Stalkers onto a front balcony that stretched across the northern curved wall, a protective visor sliding out of the way to reveal the chaos outside. The lush forested city lay in ruins beyond the outer wall of the Hive, which itself was being slowly pulled apart from below as a handful of civilian T'raykes fled back to the main Hive, to safety, forgetting their precious crops, surrendering the fruit and veg for another day to live.

The earth churned below their feet and the Hive shuddered again, a massive hand of rock entwined with roots and vines and other small clumps of vegetation reached out of the ground, swiping at anything that moved. Locane barked orders at those around him, ignoring what monster lay outside, wreaking havoc on his own kind, ordering the main doors of the Hive to be opened, to let the civilians in and to have them medically tended to before being taken back down to the lower levels, the safest place left. As swiftly as it came, the rocky hand and arm sank back into the earth, leaving behind a shallow crater of churned debris, silence washing back over the Hive once more.

"Any ideas?" Locane said, trying to control the shake in his voice.

"I think, infact, I'm pretty damned sure it's an Earth Shaper." Shadow, her hollow eyes locked on the shallow crater just beyond the holed breach in the outer wall.

"A what?" Locane said and Shadow turned to face him.

"An Earth Shaper. All Trolls are perfectly camouflaged to blend in with their surroundings. But this one is it's surroundings." She said.

Locane cocked his head, his eyes briefly glazing over with thought. "Earth Shaper..." He said and walked towards the steps of the balcony, the two Stalkers following him.

He'd heard that name before. An old memory of a story his older brother had told him when he was little stirred in his tired mind. "They're created by spells that are cast on the earth, aren't they?" He said.

Shadow nodded. "We have to kill whoever's controlling it to have a chance at defeating it."

"You'll need to weaken the Laumii's defenses first if you're going to do that. But I'll tell you now; They have more than one magician. They also have a space fleet, so don't let their appearance lull you into a false sense of security." The Wasp said as he escorted them to where they'd come in.

"How d'you know this isn't some kind of trap?" Murc said stubbornly.

JD just stared at the grey Husky for a moment. "Why would somebody wipe out three-quarters of their own race?"

"You'd be surprised at what some people would do to their own race for fun." Murc grunted.

A Shark approached their table, a cup of coffee from the server in his webbed hand and a touch-note pad in his other. "What about the signal blocker?" Blacktip asked as he pulled up a seat across from JD, setting the pad down next to his drink on the low circular table.

JD paused, enjoying the annoyed look on Murc's face, the quiet, continuous murmur of chatter and the low contented humming of the Station's engines the only thing to be heard.

"It's complicated. In short, without it, they couldn't contact anyone orbital or further out without it. It works as a planetary shield too, but if the shield's in full swing, no one can get any messages across, not even them. At half power, you can get a message through from the planet's surface, but not the other way." JD said, taking a breath.

Blacktip looked at him then nodded.

"Anyway, it seems like the T'raykes are getting what they wanted. Newark's currently in talks with Commander Locane about an alliance or something." Murc grunted, obviously not happy with the situation and doing little to hide it as he took a swig of his lukewarm tea.

The Station's rec room was slowly getting busier as shifts changed, the three captains paying no attention to the other officers or personnel as the discussion of JD and Shadow's recent visit to Stalo continued.

"I hear we're in for a bit of outside help too." Blacktip said.

JD nodded reluctantly. "Shadow's up on the com-tech deck now trying to figure out the guy's location, but it's not easy, since the barrier the T'raykes have up is interfering with our outgoing signals."

"It was just a bit of fun." Shadow said as her paws skittered across the console's various interface panels. Chester studied the data that streamed onto the main screen above, unable to find a suitable reply that wouldn't result in a divorce or worse.

"And besides," She continued, unhindered in her work. "it was a long time ago."

"How long ago?" He managed.

"My first mission." She replied, her voice lower than usual, not ashamed, but worried someone might overhear.

Chester grunted quietly and continued to study the data, picking through the names, ages, occupations, races and species and locations that streamed onto the screen. Search by registered planets. That was the easiest way to find someone.

"Angelus S. Wolfen. Species: Angelic Wolf..." Chester trailed off, turning to face Shadow.

"That's the guy!" She said, glee bubbling to the surface of her usually cold attitude.

"You didn't mention the angelic part." He growled. "It's a wonder he didn't kill you on contact!"

"It's complicated. I ain't exactly sure I know why myself." She said ponderously. "He doesn't hurt as much as other angelic beings. But if you're so damned concerned about it, we could always send captain D'Armeus to go and persuade him to help us. It is, after all, in his job description."

Chester grinned, showing his solid needle sharp fangs. "I hope this Angelus guy's feeling up to a challenge."

5 - Angel Hunt

JD walked down the street with his hood up. The rain was pouring down to the earth hard and relentlessly, bouncing off the black tarmac of the road and the concrete paving slabs he walked upon. The Demon grunted and exhaled a stream of grey smoke from his mouth, giving the effect he was smoking a cigarette, his old boots squelching on the ground with each step he took, water seeping into them, finding small ways in through the years of abuse.

I probably look as bad as I feel. He thought angrily, pulling a small, circular device from his belt. The small tracking radar showed nothing of interest so he clipped it back onto his belt and took shelter in an old doorway of a long disused shop. He stuffed his paws into his hoodie pockets and watched miserably as the near empty streets were being beaten by the rain as it continued, giving no signs of letting up, quietly cursing those he knew and whoever else he could think of. The roar of a motorcycle engine caught his attention. They were a rarity in this city due to its expansive population favouring the public transport, walking or their cars. He looked at the small radar again. The bike was indicated to be at the bottom of the road. JD stuck his head out into the rain and looked up and down the quiet street, only seeing a few people braving the rain and a small stream of cars driving past, splashing through puddles.

He continued listening to the sound of the bike engine and swore when it died. He knew it was the Angel. There was no need for the radar anymore. Every fibre in his body screamed it at him, pleading for the taste of Angelic blood. But the Demon wasn't here to kill him, he was here on orders to bring him back to base, or to at least collect some information about Trolls. He stepped back into the rain, desperately trying to ignore his natural instincts as he walked down the street in search of the Angel.

Halfway down the road, the air shifted around him as if something had passed low and fast over his head, the faintest of scents lingering in the damp air, driving JD's feral instincts wild, fighting harder to overpower his trained side as his quarry grew closer. He stood motionless in the rain at the mouth of a dumpster choked alley, small overflowing bins, cardboard boxes and black bin bags littering the ruddy ground. He looked around and cautiously entered, fingering the tip of the long blade that was safely tucked away, strapped neatly to his right forearm, the red blade and sheath perfectly camouflaged against his fine red fur. He pulled his hood down and listened, long ears twitching as he searched for any signs of movement within the alley.

Lightning split the grey noon sky and a blade like cold fire pressed against his throat, a trickle of blood running down its flawless surface. Two warm breaths on the back of neck and his own blade was out, knocking the offender's own blade away from his throat, allowing him to move out of the way, facing his attacker with his long dagger in his firm grip, his long black tail and ears taking on a lava like sheen. Before him stood the Angelic Wolf, gun at his side and sword in paw, a green aura surrounding him giving his pale fur a green tint. Angelus S. Wolfen. The one he'd been sent to find and to bring back to Nuam.

JD snarled and lept at Angel, the two blades sparking angrily as they collided. The Demon's senses quickly becoming clouded by ancient instincts he'd locked deep within himself many years ago. A blur of movement and JD slammed into the dead end wall of the alley, the old slimey stone cracking under

the sudden force.

"Why did you come?" Angel growled angrily, poised ready to strike, edging closer and closer to JD.

"I've been sent to look for you." JD grunted as he collected himself.

Angel cocked his head slightly, searching the Demon's mind, but finding nothing but solid mental walls surrounding his thoughts and memories. Angel was knocked back by a sudden flurry of fire, his sword being sent skittering across the grimey stone floor. He landed on his back, wings flared and gun raised, ready to shoot as JD loomed over him.

"I could crush your heart before the bullet leaves the chamber. Unfortunately, there are several people who would appreciate it if I were to bring you in alive." JD said bitterly.

Angel growled but stopped when the Demon purposely let a single name slip through his mental barriers. He lowered his gun and righted himself, matching JD's height with ease.

"What've you done to her?" He growled, finger still on the trigger.

"I've done nothing to her." He replied coolly. "In fact, we have a situation with a Troll. But I think it's best if General Newark explains it."

Angel looked across the large desk and at the brown Bear who sat, relaxed in his leather chair. He was taken aback by the Bear's presence, he'd never come across a Bear so well built; eight foot of muscle, ready to take on anybody and anything that opposed him and an air of authority that made the Angelic Wolf feel insignificant in his presence. Newark wasn't as relaxed as he seemed though. A controlled energy of wariness flickering through his eyes as he gazed intently at the Wolf, mentally assessing him, making Angel wonder if it was some kind of test, but so far, he hadn't succeeded in picking up any thoughts, even from those he passed on the way to the tree bound office den.

They'd had an hour of talk and now Newark was just sat there, watching. Finally, he opened his mouth and spoke again, leaning forward in his chair.

"Would you like to say anything else before you're escorted up to the Station?" He asked in an even voice.

"No sir." Angel replied.

He hadn't intended on the sir part, but it just slipped out anyway, the word produced by a small part of him, his inner cub, which was scared that the Bear might crush him if he didn't give the proper respect. Something about that amused him and he fought back a smile as he rose and walked toward the door, knowing that JD was still waiting for him on the other side.

6 - Stalo

Angel stood in the turbo lift next to JD and tugged at his black and green uniform. He'd been told that he'd had to wear Stalker uniform so that he wouldn't be attacked by the allies. He wasn't used to wearing a uniform but was surprised to find that it wasn't as uncomfortable as he'd expected it to be. He'd snorted at the rule when the Demon first told him, but soon accepted it as he was escorted planetside to see general Newark.

He stepped out of the lift and was confronted by a window of blackness dotted with white specks, a deep purple lacing its way across the star scape. He followed JD and passed a couple of open doors, some revealing ongoing lessons of magic and technology and others combat classes. Something within him longed to go up against one of these highly skilled creatures, as such a large collection of powerful beings like this would probably never be come across again. But he was here to work, sparring with a Shadow Stalker would have to wait some time.

"Turn the corner at the end and you'll find the station crew's rec room. My team are in there. I need to go and talk to captains Murc and Blacktip, so I'll be by later." JD said and started off down a side corridor that led to the bridge.

Shadow looked over her shoulder as she stood at the drink's counter, a small black fairy floating beside her, and grinned broadly when she saw the Angelic Wolf stood in the large circular doorway in Stalker green and black.

"Huh, you say something?" Ev asked suddenly.

"Uh, yeah. Take the drinks back to the table. I'll be there in a minute." Shadow said as Angel finally saw her and started towards her, weaving between the masses of tables and bodies that occupied them.

"Oh that's right! Make me do all the work!" Ev huffed and a cloud of glittering black surrounded the bases of the cups as she flew away back to the table.

"You'll get to mace someone in the head soon enough." Shadow said after the retreating fairy.

"Long time no see. Care for a non-alcoholic beverage?" She said, raising her cup of coffee mockingly. Angel chuckled and shook his head. They embraced each other in a warm hug and he pulled back, looking at the gold ring on her finger.

"You're married now?" He asked with mild amazement.

The dark blue Dragon nodded. "Two and a half years and still waiting for the honeymoon. Not his fault though. We had a major emergency so it got cut very short." She quickly added when she saw the look on his face. "Anyway, how've you been lately?"

"Eh, nothing much has gone on up until now. Just the odd Demon causing trouble here and there. Small fry really. And then JD came along..."

Shadow smiled twistedly and nodded. "Sorry about that. Thought the challenge'd be good for him. Anyway, everyone's over here." She said, waving a paw towards a table in the corner.

There was a chorus of greetings and introductions when they approached them. Spirit chuckled when Angel frowned at the small black fairy, Ev, who had the Snow Leopard Kieron pulled halfway across the table by his military tags.

"You'll get used to it. It happens on a regular basis." She said.

Lemur spun around on her stool and pulled another one from the table behind, gaining a few dirty looks

from it's users and patted it.

"Come! Sit down! This'll probably be the only time you'll get a decent break over the next week." She said and brushed a tendril of grey hair away from her face.

"You expect to have this job done within a week?" He said, trying not to gape.

"We like to get things done quickly around here." Chester grunted from the far side, and arm wrapped around Shadow as he slouched on his stool, leaning against the bluegray wall.

"All hands to their stations. Stalkers report to docking bay five." Said a calm male voice over the station's com.

"That's gotta be a new record." Kieron wheezed when Ev finally let him go.

Angel flinched as a soft voice sounded in his mind, giving out orders and delivering mental imagery of a large stoney hand protruding from the ground outside a large Bee hive.

"Looks like the T'raykes have seen fit to deliver mental imagery from their telepaths to ours." Spirit said as she pulled her black trench coat from her chair.

JD was already onboard the Star Stalker, setting up the ship's systems from his command chair. Spirit stood on the raised platform behind him and gestured for Angel to take up her seat next to the Demon. Lemur and Ev were busy at work on the consoles either side of the bridge feeding and receiving data from Kieron who was down in the engine room as well as from the station itself. Angel watched as Shadow and Chester climbed a steel ladder and disappeared into a square hatch in the ceiling.

I'm head pilot. Shadow replied through her mind after a small, mental nudge. *JD's captain, Spirit's commander, Chaz' secondary pilot, Kieron's our chief engineer, Lemur's our tech and Ev's our com tech. Any other questions before we set off?*

Not right now, thankyou.

"Start the undocking procedure." JD said flatly.

Several clanks, groans and hisses sounded out and the ship's protective visor rolled down revealing the slowly opening docking bay doors ahead of them.

"Undocking complete, ready for launch." Shadow's voice came from the cockpit.

"Take us to far station orbit then go into Hyper Space."

They emerged into normal space behind two Knight scout ships that were positioned in Stalo's distant orbit. The main viewer blanked, then a Ferret with blue markings appeared on the screen and promptly began his report.

"The planet's currently in full communication lock-down, but we've been getting some sever energy spikes on our scanner from the planet's surface. I don't know the exact location of the Hive, so I can't say what kind of condition it's in."

"Is there anyway we can warp down there, or send a ship through the barrier?" JD asked.

The Ferret shook his head doubtfully. "Sorry captain, we're not sure. We only have the enhanced scanners for ground based objects only. Our ships were pulled out re-fit, so half the equipment still isn't working right."

JD sighed heavily. "Thankyou scout commander Fitzroy. Keep to a far orbit until Captain Blacktip arrives."

Fitzroy saluted once more and the screen flickered off to reveal the planet Stalo once more.

7 - Lock Down

"What now?" Spirit asked.

JD rubbed at his face.

The past couple of months had been long and tiring and had taken a lot out of everyone. Right now they could do nothing until the T'raykes lowered their planetary shield, allowing the communications to continue between the bases.

"There is a way to get down there..." Angel said, breaking the long silence.

Everyone on the bridge looked at him curiously.

"Well? Spit it out then." JD snapped.

"It's strange, but I can feel the barrier around the planet. It's like it's part biological."

"Plant, animal...?" Lemur prompted hopefully.

"I don't know, but it's like theres ripples flowing across its surface. I've never felt anything like it before."

He said almost absent mindedly as he stared out the main viewer and at the planet below.

Lemur hummed and spun around in her raised chair, her paws once more flowing across the controls of her console.

"What you got Lemur?" Spirit asked curiously.

"Just trying something with the ship's sensors..."

The scan data on both Spirit's and JD's scan screens dipped dramatically before rising back up to standard levels before dropping again, doing it every five seconds in a steady pattern.

"I've been working on getting accurate barrier readings for the past hour or so, but I was looking more to the technology side of things and not biological."

"Can we warp down then?" JD queried.

"No." Angel said suddenly. "Too dangerous. The energy field it's generating may break up the warp pattern as you pass through."

JD grunted.

"A ship then...?" Spirit asked.

Angel paused. "I don't know much about this technology, but it's got a better chance for survival."

JD opened his mouth and was about to question the two, then he remember what happened when they tried to contact the T'raykes after the bombing. The barrier had killed some of their finest telepaths, then it was later revealed that several warping attempts had severely backfired too.

"Lemur, I want you and Kieron to adjust the fighters' shields to mimic the barrier as much as possible. Ev'll stream the data down to you both as it moves." JD said and Lemur nodded before quickly leaving the bridge.

"I hear you're working on a way to get through the barrier." Captain Blacktip said.

JD looked up at the main viewer. The slim Shark had taken his soft cap off and had the top of his shirt unbuttoned.

"There's two more fighters to configure." He replied. "I'll send Chester down first, and if he makes it, we'll send you the blue print data for the reajust."

A grunt and a string of angry curses floated down from the cockpit.

"Good. The sooner I send my pilots out, the sooner I can shut down the main engines." Blacktip panted.

"What's the matter?"

"That re-fit isn't sitting well with Eclipse. She's over heating, same with Lady Mariah and Moonlight. Both ship's commanders are trying to sort it out, as are we, but if it keeps up, we have to head back to base." JD hoped that wouldn't be the case. He didn't know what was going on down on Stalo, but it had to be worse than the previous Laumii attacks for the T'raykes to go into lock down and refuse to acknowledge their presence.

"All fighters reconfigured." Kieron said over the ship com.

"Chester!" JD called.

The Doberman slid down the cockpit ladder and landed heavily.

"If you manage to get planetside, I want a full report A.S.A.P, understood?"

Chester nodded.

"Good luck, man." Blacktip said over the com and signed off.

Chester growled under his breath, the flesh around his muzzle wrinkling slightly as he fought back the urge to snarl at his captain. Angel looked at JD for a moment when the Vampire left the bridge, the signs of morbid glee at his team mate's underlying distress flowing strong from the Demon.

"What's your problem with him?" He asked, slightly annoyed, yet not in the least bit surprised at the hostility the Demon felt towards Vampire.

'Non of your damn business." He growled angrily.

Angel's ears fell back, flat to his head and he flashed his teeth, a low growl thrumming out from his throat.

"I swear I'll space the pair of you if you start fighting." Spirit interjected calmly as she worked on her console.

The Angelic Wolf and Demon sank back into their chairs and watched the slowly growing fleet of grey ships. Two more warships were expected along with a third supply ship that was coming from Tenret, Nuam's neighbouring planet, stocked up and ready to bring fresh food, clothing and medical supplies to the Insectoids. They watched as a small black and green marked fighter ship escaped the confines of the Star Stalker's docking bay and vanished into the formations of warships and supply ships. An hour passed, and still no sign of Chester. His ship's tag vanished off the long scan radar as soon as he reached the barrier. Three hours passed and a scattered message came in, the small fighter's tag reappearing on the radar seconds after it was received.

"It worked..." JD said in mild amazement. "Send Blacktip the blue print data. Angel, you're riding with Shadow. Kieron, Spirit, you're planetside too. Contact me as soon as you get down there." JD said and dismissed them.

"Why do I have to stay up here with you?" Ev squeaked.

"Because the Laumii have their own warships, and I need at least one more crewman on hand to keep this tub going."

Ev sighed heavily and watched the others go.

8 - The Hive

"Sorry about the tight squeeze. A passenger's an emergency thing only." Shadow said apologetically.

"I've been stuffed in worse spots, believe me." Angel replied from behind her.

As the three fighters entered Stalo's atmosphere, the shields flared violently and the ships shook as they passed through the barrier. The scanners and radar had been blinded and the shields' power had dropped to quarter strength. They couldn't communicate with one another, so they were practically flying blind, hoping the systems would automatically right themselves and that the thick clouds would part soon.

"Three more class A fighters have just entered the atmosphere, sir." Scan tech Bosson said.

The Wasp gripped the scan console tightly as the Hive was rocked again.

"What's their position?" Locane asked.

"It's hard to tell. The barrier's damaged some of their systems." She replied, trying to get an accurate reading on them.

Laser fire rained down from the sky, scattering the attacking Laumii. The Hive shook again and a massive stoney hand rose from the ground and high into the air, knocking out another defense tower that was stood over what was left of the Hive's outer wall. Further back, a single shot took out a group of Laumii and the Earth Shaper's arm crumbled back into the ground. A brief cheer and the T'rayke's own laser fire joined the Stalkers' own once more, forcing the Laumii back.

"Your timing couldn't be better." Commander Locane said, removing his cap as he approached the four Stalkers in the rear docking bay.

Spirit introduced herself and her team mates before going on to explaining what was going on in the planet's orbit and also how they managed to get through the barrier as they walked into the main Hive. The Wasp led them into a meeting room that was situated near the main control and gestured for them to sit.

"The damage done by this latest attack is high. The next attack, we stand to lose the Hive." He said.

"How many men did you lose this time?" Spirit asked, unsure she wanted to know the answer.

Locane paused, deep red eyes glazing over for a moment as he sent out a mental query.

"My chief medical officer says around thirty were T'raykes lost."

"That's half of your remaining soldiery." Angel said.

Locane nodded grimly.

"What happened to the first of our ships that came through?" Shadow asked, worry and fear settling in the pit of her stomach.

Locane slowly shook his head.

"It came up on our scanners a few times, but we failed to make contact with it. I've told my scan techs to report any sightings of the ship immediately, but that was well over an hour ago."

Locane watched the Dragon carefully, unsure of how she'd react to the news. It was clear that she cared a great deal about the pilot of the missing ship and the winged Wolf next to her seemed to react to her underlying worry, making subtle movements towards her.

"Uh, commander Locane, if you're having problems with any scanner or defense repairs, I'd gladly help."

The Snow Leopard said.

Locane paused a moment, cautious of Kieron's offer, but accepted it anyway, pushing aside any old stories he'd heard as a child about their side.

"I will have someone escort you to main scan immediately."

Chester came to on the outskirts of a thick forest. He was sat in what was left of the cockpit of his ship. He'd ejected soon after the Earth Shaper took a swipe at his wing, damaging his ship badly and sending it spiralling down.

"Damn Troll." He grunted angrily as he pulled himself upright into a sitting position.

His head spun and he hurt all over. Gathering his senses, he looked at his surroundings and climbed out of the wreckage, drawing his sword, swaying uncertainly on his feet in a non-existent breeze. He fuzzily wondered how long he'd been unconscious for and how far away from the Hive he was. He staggered a little further away from the smoking wreckage and explored the area around the crash site, expecting at any moment to be ambushed.

The bushes around him rustled and he took up a fighting stance, unsure of how many Laumii were lurking in the undergrowth. Several of the pale skinned Humanoids emerged slowly, more leaping quickly at the Doberman from different angles. Chester managed to successfully down two of them, sliving one in half and stabbing the other, spilling their innards across the ground before they had a chance to realise what was going on. A Laumii barrelled into his back, but he managed to stay upright, grabbing his attacker by the collar of his shirt and throwing him over his shoulder onto the ground at his feet, driving his sword into his head. The Vampire spun around neatly on one foot and kicked another Laumii in the chest with a sickening crack, sending him rolling awkwardly across the ground. But Chester was still surrounded. The Laumii poured in from nowhere. He could feel himself wearing down, his injuries getting the better of him. A snap of a twig from somewhere behind him and his world went dark with a sharp jolt of pain.

9 - Distractions

The masses of screens lit up when Kieron restored the main scan room's power. The female black Ant stood next to him panicked when a mass of unrecognised ships were picked up on the secondary scanner.

"They're ours, don't worry." He said reassuringly.

A look of total relief settled on scan tech Dana's features and her shoulders sagged.

"Sorry. It's been extremely stressful lately." She said.

"No need to apologise." Kieron said. "I'd have had a near spaz attack too if that many unmarked came up on my scan." He grinned crookedly.

Within moments all the black dots turned grey and were marked 'Knights'.

"The scanners are back online sir." Dana said over the com. "The Shadow Stalkers' Knights have just entered the atmosphere successfully."

"Any other news?" Locane asked.

"Yessir. We have a fixed location for the missing Stalker ship. I'm now sending the data to your desk comp."

Locane nodded and the com screen on the wall went dark again. Shadow went rigid in her chair when Dana announced the news. Locane looked at the fresh data and sighed heavily.

"Problem?" Spirit asked.

"Your ship's crashed ten miles north of here on the boarder of Laumii territory."

"The forest?"

Locane nodded grimly.

"I'm gonna go get him." Shadow said, rising from her seat.

Everyone looked at her with wide eyes, stunned silence filling the room.

"You can't!" Angel said in protest.

"Yes I can." Shadow replied defiantly.

"The Wolf is right. If the Earth Shaper doesn't get you, then the Laumii will." Locane said coolly.

"I've survived worse." She grunted and pulled her jacket on.

"That's besides the point. You can't go in there alone-"

"You're not comming with me Angel." She said.

The Dragon's five-twelve was nothing compared to the Angelic Wolf's six-two, but she didn't care. He could try to stop her, but he knew all too well that she was a fair match for him and had wrestled him to the ground before, and the only way to stop her from going after her life mate was to kill her, which was soemthing he didn't even want to consider.

"Blacktip can spare a couple of his Knights." Spirit said, ignoring the growing tension in the room.

Locane nodded, but Angel didn't budge.

"Angel, we need you here incase the Earth Shaper turns up again." Spirit said, looking him dead in the eye.

Locane slid a small, thin case across the polished table top, towards Shadow. She caught it and picked it up, eyeing it suspiciously.

"Standard data chip. Used all across the planet. It contains the data scan tech Dana sent me." The Wasp said and took a quick glance at the Wolf and Cheetah. "I'll escort you to the rear docking bay. In

the meantime, commander Swiftpaw, you may use our equipment to contact your people."
"I'll let you know when they're in position." Spirit said and watched them leave the room. "You alright?"
She asked when she sat in Locane's chair, waiting for an outside signal on his desk com.
"I'm fine." Angel replied as he looked out the window.
"You don't sound it."
Angel sighed and his posture sagged. "I'm just finding it a bit difficult. Everyone's so closed with their thoughts, it's frustrating."
"Force of habit. We were all trained, as were the T'raykes, to keep our thoughts private and our mental barriers up unless absolutely necessary to do so otherwise."
Angel nodded slowly, understanding all too well the need to keep a mental barrier erect in the mind. You never know who or what could be trying to pry into your thoughts and memories.
"And yes; Shadow will be fine." Spirit said as Angel opened his mouth to speak again.

Shadow flew her ship through the cover of the clouds, following the data map Locane had given to her. Two more fighters followed, Knight grey, Blacktip having agreed almost immediately to dispatch them to Shadow on a rescue mission. They landed near the crash site and locked down their ships before investigating the scene.

"There's no one here." The white Rhino said.

Shadow immediately picked up the Doberman's scent and her hope of finding him grew.

"Jodan, stay with the ships and contact me as soon as anything happens."

The Rhino saluted and took up guard, ears swivelling and eyes alert, his entire being ready to fend off any surprise attack.

"Murffit, you're with me." She said and the Woodpecker followed her into the forest.

It wasn't long before they came across his sword, its blood stained blade buried deep into the ground. Murffit looked at it then at Shadow.

"Touch it, please. We need to know what happened." She said.

Murffit reached out and touched the handle of the delicate looking blade. He shuddered and went rigid, his grip tightening and eyes rolling back into his skull as his knees buckled beneath him.

10 - Orbital

"What is the meaning of the barrier?" Came that same voice.

The question just kept on being repeated as did the blows when Chester didn't answer. He was too weak to do anything. He couldn't fight back. He'd lost too much blood, but he surprised himself when a growling chuckle passed his split lips.

"What's so damn funny?" The voice hissed angrily.

"I find it funny," Chester wheezed. "That you ain't figured that out for yourselves."

The Laumii chief punched the Doberman in his gut so hard that he whimpered and tugged at the bindings as he tried to double up. He wondered inanely at how many times in his life he'd been bound up, excluding the moments that happened in the bedroom. On too many times, he decided and tried once more to break free. The shadows around the room wavered but he was forced back into submission when hot pain ripped into his side, forcing a cry of agony from his bloodied mouth.

"You're not so good with silver, are you?" The chief snarled deviously as he twisted his knife in the Vampire's side before slowly removing it.

The Shadow Stalkers' warships were in battle formation above Stalos, prepared for any Laumii ships to appear in the planet's orbit.

JD was sat in the command chair on the bridge of his ship talking with captain Blacktip. The Shark seemed to be in better condition than before.

"I'm assuming you've sorted your engine problem?" JD asked.

The slim Shark nodded. "I've had to send Lady Mariah back to base though. Her engines overheated too quickly and on what little back-up power she had, she'd be a sitting duck if we come under heavy fire."

"So we're only one heavy down then?"

"Yeah. But don't relax too much; we still don't know how big the Laumii fleet is."

"According to commander Locaen, there were fifty enemy ships to begin with, but they managed to destroy half their fleet."

JD paused and looked at his main scan when it started bleeping. A mass of enemy ships appeared on the outer boundaries of T'rayke space.

"Twenty five against twenty. Think we can handle it?"

Blacktip flashed his rows of teeth in a cruel grin.

"Oh, I think we can manage."

Alarms on all ships rang out as the Laumii battle cruisers and warships approached.

"Raise all shields!" Locane shouted from the command balcony in the main room.

Spirit stood beside him, monitoring one of the consoles. Locane ordered the last of his men to their battle stations, praying they'd all survive. So far, he'd gotten lucky. The under ground chambers had survived, but those down there; the old, disabled, young and injured were running out of supplies and were slowly starving.

"One way or another, I'm aiming to make this the last battle." The Wasp said.

Spirit nodded, knowing how the Insectoid felt. She opened a line to the Knights who were hiding in the cover of the clouds. The Hive shuddered and its shields flared as the Earth Shaper rose once more,

taking swipes at the T'raykes. Behind the crumbled outer wall, the Laumii charged head first into the waiting traps, being ambushed by the waiting insectoids. All hell broke loose when the Knights barreled out of the clouds, showering the enemy with laser fire. Chunks of rock were being chipped off the Earth Shaper's arm, but it had no effect.

"Angel, d'you think you get get the Earth Shaper away from the Hive?" SPirit asked. He nodded and ran to the exit, his green aura flaring as he prepared to do battle.

"That was close." Murffit panted as they crept through the forest.

The two had hidden in the trees when the Laumii army had marched by, cutting a fresh trail through the undergrowth.

"They're not very sharp, are they?" Shadow murmured.

"No, but they're hard bastards to have wiped out so many T'raykes." Murffit replied.

Shadow agreed, determined to ignore what was going on at the Hive, and they continued onwards, following the trail left by the marching Laumii.

They soon came to a base, put together with sheets of metal, wood and canvas. It was hidden deep within the forest and seemed abandoned. There was no sign of heavy artillery either on the makeshift base.

"Those old rifles, swords and spears must be the only weapons they have to fight planetside." Murffit said.

"Don't forget the Troll." Shadow replied. "You picking anything up?"

The Woodpecker shook his head. "Sorry sir, nothing. They must've used another route."

Shadow sighed, feeling the anxiety rising.

"Wait..." Murffit said suddenly. "Do you smell that?"

Shadow inhaled deeply and her forked tongue flickered out, testing the air.

"Blood. But it's old." She said and carefully followed the weakening scent to a small clearing a few yards away from their hiding spot.

11 - Earth Shaper

A small spattering of blood stained the fallen leaves. Murffit tentatively reached out to touch it, his body going rigid once more as a struggle of limbs, spears and curling shadows flitted violently through his mind, the sound of the scene muffled. The struggle stopped as suddenly as it started, a tall pale figure dragging the beaten body of a Doberman away, across the forest floor, trailing drops of blood as a mass of more pale figures followed. A sharp gasp and Murffit came to from the vision.

"He's still alive, but badly hurt." The Woodpecker said, gasping for air.

A sigh of relief escaped past Shadow's lips.

"Now all we have to do is find him and get out of here."

They crept towards the makeshift base, Shadow's nostrils flaring and tongue flicking as she tested the air, untangling Chester's scent from the others, following it through the empty base as it grew stronger. There was no security of any sort and there were no signs of any remaining Laumii.

"I got a bad feeling about this. Where're the guards and injured Laumii?" Murffit whispered uneasily as he followed the Dragon between a tight cluster of huts.

"The injured are more than likely dead. The T'raykes aren't ones for leaving survivors."

"And the guards?"

"With the army. There's only a handful of T'raykes left and a handful of us planetside, so I'd say they're feeling pretty damned confident."

"Thick headed is what I'd say." Murffit grunted and Shadow grinned.

They came across a narrow crossroads and carried on straight after a moment of listening for signs of life. Shadow looked over her shoulder when she realised that Murffit had lagged behind. He had his hand on a wooden support pole of a hut. Another vision.

"The next hut to the right." He said, panting heavily.

Chester growled softly as he saw two figures enter the room. He heard his name said, the female voice familiar to him.

"There's still people here." He said weakly, the restraints the only thing holding him upright.

He looked up, his sight clearing somewhat and saw a Woodpecker in two-tone grey and black uniform accompanied by a blue, battle scarred female Dragon. A small smile touched his lips when he saw her walk towards him, her black talons turning an un-shining silver.

"You better hurry up. There's someone coming." Murffit said from the doorway.

"Better late than never." Shadow grunted as she tore through the Vampire's restraints.

Chester chuckled and leaned unwillingly on Shadow.

"Save one for me." He said hoarsely as three armed Laumii marched into the room.

Murffit quickly stepped back as one of them swung for him, the Woodpecker smashing the Humanoid's jaw with the butt of his gun, proceeding to shoot him, a spray of crimson hitting the wall behind, sliding down it. Chester growled hungrily and threw himself at the closest Laumii, the Humanoid freezing mid-attack, hitting the floor heavily as the Doberman sank his fangs into his neck, tearing through the pale flesh and drinking his blood hungrily. The last Laumii tried to escape, but Murffit was blocking the only way out. The soldier spun around on his heel and looked at Shadow then to Chester as he rose, wounds quickly healing. The Laumii charged, sword raised. Shadow lashed out, slicing his head in two with ease, a twin blade stabbing through the fine scales of her left forearm, the Laumii's own blade

sliding from his grip as he stumbled forward, a pool of blood forming beneath what was left of his head.

Angel banked sharply out of the way, gracefully weaving between the heavy laser fire as the massive rocky arm flailed, trying to knock him from the sky. He drew his sword and swooped down into the mass of heaving bodies below, cutting down the Laumii with ease, blood fountaining into the air for a few brief moments, spattering and staining his pale fur and wings. He pulled up and joined the back of a formation of fighters as they came in low, opening fire on the enemy below. The fighters then broke formation and disappeared back into the clouds again as the Earth Shaper pulled its full form out of the earth, leaving a massive, crater-like depression behind in the ground. Never before had anyone seen the full form of an Earth Shaper. It was the size of the Hive, vines and roots gripped and hung from its rocky body. There seemed to be only one facial feature; A mouth like a cavern.

The Earth Shaper took a lumbering step forward, the fighting T'raykes and Laumii on the ground parting like water as its foot crashed down, shaking everything like an earthquake. Angel circled it, searching for any signs of weakness, but finding none as the creature continued its onslaught, crushing anything and everything that got in its way as it slowly lumbered back towards the Hive. Everything that was thrown at the Troll had little to no effect on it, so the winged Wolf wheeled back to try and find the magician controlling it, hoping he could before the monster made it to the largely defenseless Hive.

12 - Final Strike

Angel swooped down low, white, jagged streaks of lightning slamming into the ground below sending Laumii in all directions, but the Earth Shaper failed to cease its attack. The magician was well hidden, which frustrated him immensely. Then the familiar sound of small engines appeared low overhead, hidden by the cloud cover. Three ships, he guessed. The ships faded again and a familiar roar echoed down. He wheeled sharply back towards the Earth Shaper as a dark blue figure in the same black and green uniform as his own dropped from the clouds above the Troll, seemingly intent on the throng of fighting bodies that moved at its feet.

The magician stays close to the Troll. Shadow's voice echoed in the back of Angel's mind.

He swore angrily and sped up.

Why didn't I think of that before? He thought angrily to himself. He didn't know, and he couldn't dwell on it, not when there was a war going on around him. He watched as Shadow disappeared into the heaving mass of T'raykes and Laumii.

Keep him busy for us. She said, her voice calm and level as the Earth Shaper took a swipe at the grounded warriors, bodies flying awkwardly through the air, limbs flailing wildly and blood spraying. A massive rocky arm swung at Angel and a frustrated roar drowned out all other noise as the winged Wolf tucked his wings in and dived gracefully beneath it before proceeding to circle the monster, lightning stabbing out from his palms and slamming into its rocky body, doing little more than chip away small pebbles. Occasionally he'd see Shadow tearing mercilessly through the Laumii as they outnumbered the T'raykes, their weapons bouncing off her un-shining bio-armour as she cut them down with ease. On the fifth orbit, he spotted a heavily robed figure, necklaces of runes draped around his shoulders and neck, encircled by heavily armed Laumii warriors who were fighting furiously to protect him. But before Angel could say or do anything, the magician looked up, making direct eye contact, full green eyes looking into his own, stalling all Angel's thoughts. A boulder tumbled down, smashing into Angel's back, his green aura vanishing and wings crumpling.

"Tighten formation." Blacktip said over the com.

The five grey warships encroached on the Laumii's own warships, forcing them back. The Laumii had lost three quarters of their space force to the Stalker Knights, but they were stubborn and refused to give up no matter how outnumbered and outmaneuvered they were.

"Enemy warship one has launched a seeker." Ferrihnoh said.

"Take it out." Blacktip growled, quickly tiring of the Laumii's stubbornness.

"Way ahead of you, sir." Ferrihnoh replied as a missile sailed out from behind them and towards the small enemy seeker ship, reducing it to debris in a violent flare of fire.

"Enemy warships are on the move. They're powering up their hyper drives." JD said over the com.

"Let them go. We'll go after them if we have to." The Shark replied as the Laumii ships disappeared into the slip stream of hyper space. "All ships to defensive position Delta Three and stay alert." And closed all the connections but one. "Heard from the planet yet?"

"Only snatches of messages from Kieron." JD said. "Apparently they're making some good progress. But that's all I know."

"Looks like it's back to the waiting game then."

The boulder slammed into a crowd of Laumii as they ganged up on a small group of T'raykes, crushing them under its weight. Angel's aura flared violently, knocking those back that stood around him, his ears flat to his head, teeth bared in an angry snarl, looking about himself. The Earth Shaper loomed high above, and just ahead, a string of death cries called out as blood rained to the ground, Laumii after Laumii falling prey to the Weredragon as she sliced her way through the crowd, ignoring the laser shots that continued to rain down from above. Angel drew his sword once more, countering an enemy attack, stopping the Laumii's own sword above his head. The Laumiis wheezed and blood speckled his lips when a long, black spike ripped through him from behind. The Laumii slid off the stinger, slumping lifeless to the floor as the Insectoid flew off in search for more prey as there became less and less Laumii. Angel saw Shadow up ahead fighting furiously with the magician's guards, dodging, ducking and lashing out with every available limb, bones cracking and blood spraying as one by one they fell, leaving the magician unguarded.

He saw Angel coming and raised a hand, palm flat, fingers spread, a smokey barrier appearing in front of him. Shadow started for him too but was instantly dogged by a group of Laumii and dragged to the ground, swearing angrily. Angel tried to ignore it, reassuring himself that five spindly warrior Laumii were nothing to her. He inhaled deeply and charged at the magician, smashing his protective barrier, shattering it like glass. The Earth Shaper roared, shaking everything as it became agitated, the magician controlling it growing weaker as he tried fending off the attacking Wolf. The magician's eyes suddenly went wide as a blur passed through him. Angel stood, blood dripping from his blade, watching as the magician slid to the ground, blood pooling beneath his dying body, a look of shock and terror frozen on his face.

The Earth Shaper roared and Angel took to the air once more, green aura ablaze as he slammed into it, passing right through its waist like an arrow through exposed flesh. The Troll roared again and nearly toppled over. Everyone around it scattered, even the Laumii fled as balls of plasma rained down from the sky, the energy bombs doing more damage to the monster. It was on its knees when Angel came back at it, dealing the death blow, the Earth Shaper crumbling to the ground in a rush of rocky debris and stone dust.

13 - Victory

The sun set once more over the S'nect region, hiding the carnage of the war. The Laumii had been beaten back and chased away by the remaining T'rayke and Shadow Stalker forces.

Commander Locane sat at his desk with the com line open to Nuam. His hard peaked cap sat neatly in front of him on his desk as he waited for general Newark. A courteous dip of his head was given when the old Bear came on screen.

"Commander Locane, it's good to see you alive and well." Newark said honestly.

Locane tried not to gape at the words. He'd never in his life thought he'd hear something like that come from the leader of the Shadow Stalkers and actually mean it.

"Thank you." He replied, swallowing hard. "Without your help we wouldn't have survived. We are indebted to you."

Newark bowed his head briefly, seemingly trying to work out what to say.

"This has been a hard decision to make, commander, but even my crew are in agreement."

Locane tilted his head slightly.

"A truce." Newark said. "I know it's been a while since our last real conflict and the proposed peace treaty would act as a sort of safety net should anything like this happen again."

Locane was taken aback by Newark's bluntness. He had nothing left to lose as his family had disowned him as soon as those underground were released and treated for their ailments and he knew the remaining T'rayke forces would be glad to have a fall back.

"I'll speak with my commanding officers first." The Wasp said.

"As soon as you get an answer let me know and we can arrange a real meeting."

Several weeks passed and the supply convoys that were going to and from Stalo were becoming less and less. The Hive rebuild was going smoothly and the T'raykes had agreed to the treaty.

"I hear they're on about building a new space station." Kieron said then took a swig of his beer.

"It's gonna be put between our solar system and theirs. Kinda like a halfway house for traders and the like." Ev said as she perched on the rim of an empty pint glass.

"An open port." Spirit said.

"That's it."

"Sounds like an interesting undertaking." Lemur said. "Who's building it?"

"The Panzars. They're building it on their orbital building rig then towing it to Mid-Space and assembling it there." Ev replied.

"I didn't actually know space stations were built like that." Spirit mused.

"That's how most of 'em are built, ours included. In fact, that's where we get our ships." Kieron said from across the table.

"Can't wait 'till it's up and running." Lemur said and flinched as Chester appeared next to her.

"Blacktip's son," The Vampire announced. "is called Mykal."

"So that's where you two've been hiding all day." Kieron said.

"We were in the vicinity, so it was kinda hard to avoid." Shadow said and sat down heavily.

"News travels fast around here, thought you knew that?" Chester added.

Angel approached the low living room table in the motel where he was staying the night, curious of the small black leather clad oval case rimmed with gold, that was sat dead center on the table. He picked it up gingerly and rotated it in his paws. The leather was like nothing he'd ever felt before and the gold shone brightly under the old light that hung loosely from the yellowing ceiling. He flicked the clasp up and open the case to reveal a gold oval medal attached to a black ribbon with green, grey and a single blue stripe woven into it. The image on the medal was of the Shadow Stalkers' badge; a Dragon's head set on a cross, inlaid into the golden surface with the rare blue gold, the same metal the general's wrist cuffs were made from. Lodged neatly in the lid was a note written on a piece of parchment, thanking him for his help and strength in a time of great need, signed by both general Newark and Commander Locane. He wondered idly if he would ever see them all again and hoped he would. He tucked the one of a kind medal away, safely in his pack and slipped off to bed, ready for the next day, when he would return home.