

# Children of the Garden Wars

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## *Dusk*

"Hoppers of the Outlands, come forth." Lord Cottontail and his guards stood in the middle of the Thicket.

The bushes rustled with movement. Camouflage piles of wood and sticks stirred with golden eyes agape. The Outland Hoppers, around thirty in number, covered ground sheepishly and slowly. They kept their black and brown faces pointed down as they neared the flawless white fur of Lord Cottontail.

"Who is in charge here? Why have you not rallied your fighters to take part in tonight's raid?"

Lord Cottontail beckoned for none other than the old greying Hopper chief, Long Ear. A path formed among the bowed noses and lowered ears, out emerged the large Long Ear towering over Cottontail.

"I am my Lord, my name is Long Ear. We coexist in peace with the Crawlers here. This is your conflict, not ours." The most massive of Cottontail's guards stepped forward; Cottontail ordered the guard back into line with a flick of his ear.

"Not yours? My brother we are all in this fight together. Why a crawler last night just took one of our young from Hoppiton. How can you sit there and say such things? A poor mother's child lays digesting in the belly of one of those slithering vermin," Cottontail said.

"The child's loss is regrettable, but you and I both know a Crawler would not attack unless provoked. They much prefer the taste

of more challenging sport."

"If you refuse to help the cause Long Ear, than consider yourself a permanent Outland Hopper. The same goes for all of you Heads of House."

Cottontail threatened the community as a whole but he knew what Long Ear said was law. It was the Hopper way. Long Ear and other community leaders spoke for their communes, and Heads of House spoke for their own families. It was Long Ear's choice to make, a choice he had earned the right to make long ago. Long Ear turned his back to Cottontail and stood upon his massive hind legs to address the Outland Hoppers.

"You are all free to make your own choices here. I would never stop any of you from doing what you felt was right for your families. We have prospered many ages here in the Thicket and have done so all by ourselves. Join Lord Cottontail now if you wish to pursue the assault on the Crawlers. You will be welcomed back should you return."

Not one head raised, not one foot moved from where it stood, silently they all pledged their allegiance to Long Ear. Lord Cottontail stood stewing in his fast raising temperament. Long ear turned to the young hopper ruler and bowed his head.

Lord Cottontail narrowed his eyes and wriggled his nose in disgust. "Come fellow white fur Hoppers, these brown Outlanders wish to be isolated, so be it. No Hopper is to come to their aid, no matter what circumstance has befallen them. Let them be fed to the Crawlers and torn apart by the Longsnouts for their treachery."

Cottontail's small executive force bounded quickly north disappearing in the dense underbrush around the Thicket. Long Ear sighed and raised his head. The women and the young ones joined their Heads of House in the open. They all sat in silence with their eyes fixed upon Long Ear. He turned and hopped to his den to rest without saying a word.

That night the Thicket echoed with the faint screams of dying Hoppers and the hisses of fallen Crawlers. Long Ear laid in the dark saddened at how quickly the peace he had created was being dismantled by Cottontail.

### ***Night***

From the inside of a sheltered above ground burrow, two young Hoppers contemplated defiance of their Heads of House, loyal to Long Ear.

"Why shouldn't we go? I refuse to sit and let Hoppers fight and die for the Thicket, we should be out there helping."

"How do you plan on us doing that? You're not a fighter, I'm not a fighter, we have no fighters. Long Ear has worked hard for peace with the Crawlers and Cottontail is destroying that this night. The Thicket won't be safe ever again after this. How could the Crawlers ever trust us now? Cottontail is lucky Long Ear didn't challenge him."

"Old Long Ear? What could he possibly do to Lord Cottontail?"

"My father says Long Ear was a Captain in the Garden Wars. Says he went on some secret assassination missions and defeated a platoon

of Longsnouts, by himself. He also said that Long Ear lost an entire squad once, said he was the only Hopper to come back out of twenty. Guess he went crazy after that, didn't care if he lived or died."

The young Hopper stared blankly at the sleeping Long Ear on the far end of the Thicket. The old grey mound heaved up and down with every deep breath, creating a faint grumble of a snore.

"Nah, I can't see it. Long Ear is no warrior. If what you say is true, how could he possibly have turned out like this? I mean he speaks out against the War all the time. Something must have happen to him to turn him into the Long Ear we know. What does your Dad say about that?"

Before the answer could come the two were interrupted by another young male Hopper.

"Hey, we got a group of three going out to help Cottontail you guys coming?"

The Story Teller's eyes become wide with excitement. He looked to his comrade for confirmation. Friendship ran deep as a family blood bond among Hoppers. He waited for the decision hoping the stories of Long Ear had inspired his comrade.

"We'll help." The two smiled at each other and joined the other three.

The five young Hoppers stealthily left the sleeping Thicket and trotted toward the faint sounds of battle in the distance. Full of young excitement and vitality they looked back at the moonlit Thicket, not thinking for one moment they might never see it again.

### ***Later that Night***

The Five covered a great distance away from the Thicket into the forest before they found any new signs of life. Small mounds of upturned earth became concentrated among the underbrush the further they penetrated into the thick woodland.

"Crawler dens those are," the largest of the Five said.

"Split up and start checking them, we won't catch up to Cottontail's front line tonight anyway. At least we can be sure their path home is clear. Stay within earshot, we'll need at least two Hoppers to a Crawler to take them down."

Hole after hole was inspected. They expanded their coverage area checking the mounds that were further out and farther apart.

"Found a nest," the Story Teller called out.

The Five converged on the discovery.

"Look in there, two eggs, maybe three. Let us wait for the female."

They waited silently in the shadows ten bounds away, a distance easily covered by a young Hopper in three seconds. After a short while the small female Crawler emerged, her dark green scales glimmered in the moonlight. The Five sprinted toward her the moment the slender tube-like body was fully visible. Her head snapped up as she sensed the advancing movement. The tail end of her body whipped the leading Hopper mid bound causing him to tumble. She was frantic

in her defense to protect the unborn. A Mother's guard is a force never to be meddled with, no matter the creature.

The other four began nipping with their teeth at any piece of flesh they could get at. With her calculating targeting system the Crawler struck the Story Teller, capturing his head between her jaws. She began to squeeze with skull crushing force. The young Hopper let out a scream.

"Get her head off," the large Hopper shouted.

The four began to take large bits of flesh from the same area in rapid succession until the spine was severed and she relaxed her grip. The limp Crawler body collapsed on top of the Story Teller. The comrade pulled as the Story Teller wriggled to free himself from under the smothering girth of the body.

Filled with the fury of battle the others dashed into the den one after the other. Smashing the eggs with their powerful hind legs, the embryonic Crawler-slime splashed their brown noses and quickly crusted on their fur. Shortly after, they made their way outside, to the field of victory.

None of them could speak. Thousands of new emotions rippled through every fiber of muscle in their small young bodies. Their daze was short lived.

A large Crawler quickly emerged from the nearby underbrush. It was a male twice as large as the female. He paused for a split second surveying the devastation the Five had created. The fight was on and the Largest Hopper would be the first to die.

## ***Morning***

Worry and desperation ran an infectious course amongst the inhabitants of the Thicket. Long Ear went from burrow to burrow informing the Outland Hoppers of the runaways, and consoling the families of the Five. A rustling from the south brought two exhausted blood stained Hoppers out of the underbrush. The Thicket converged upon them with inquiry. Two relieved Heads of House and three now more sullen than before huddled close around the two survivors.

"There are only two of you. You were five in number, where are the others?" the group demanded.

"We got attacked by two Crawlers, a male and a female. Our number enabled us to kill the female but the male out skilled us. The other three were crushed, we ran while he was distracted with the last of the others," the Story Teller said this as he stood next to his gullible red streaked comrade.

Long Ear forced himself into the small circle.

"Where is the Crawler now? Were you followed? Stupid young ones, you killed his mate. His blood lust will blind him to fight to the death until she is avenged."

As Long Ear uttered the words a thundering crash came through the canopy above the Thicket. A Crawler now lay coiled up in a fighting stance eyeing the bloodied pair of young Hoppers. Long Ear placed himself between the cluster of Hoppers and the Crawler.

"Get to the shelter of your burrows my Outland Hoppers. Protect the young ones."

At his order the Thicket was cleared as Hoppers dashed in all directions seeking the protection of their fortified burrows. They all looked on as Long Ear spoke to the Crawler who sat jittering in rage.

"Crawler you have taken three of our young. Surely this is adequate for your loss. Leave the Thicket in peace, brother of the Garden."

The Crawler uncoiled like a welled up spring and with jaws wide lunged at Long Ear. The large greying rabbit's torso turned to earth as the Crawler's nose slammed into the ground. His target moved, and moved quickly.

"Please, let you and I talk this out. There need not be any more bloodshed," Long Ear pleaded with the Crawler from his new position behind.

Long Ear was visibly out of breath, the onlooking Hoppers were not sure if he would be able to dodge another attack. The great muscular ribs of the Crawler dug into the moist dirt as he drew upon newly created momentum. Long Ear was already in the air by the time the Crawler had made the second strike. The great girth of the large Hopper on his neck made the Crawler summon all his strength just to stay balanced. Long Ear sank his long dagger teeth into the flesh behind the Crawler's head.

Blood sprayed in all directions as the Crawler erratically

tossed his head back and forth. Hissing in pain and writhing in desperate agony to shake Long Ear off, the Crawler turned over to slam his back against the ground. It proved to be ineffective and the old Long Ear stayed firmly affixed until the Crawler moved no more and lay dead in the middle of the once peaceful Thicket. Long Ear spoke to the Thicket in a commanding rasping breath.

“Heads of house prepare your families, we must leave the Thicket.”

Long Ear placed his fangs in the familiar holes on the Crawler and dragged it out of sight.