

**GEARWORLD:
INVASION**

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Chapter 1: Unto The Breach

Shadowfang awoke with a gasp, her mind still reeling with nightmares of twigjack invasions. Redfoot was there, had been there, with all four of his legs snuggled around her, his hands grooming her fur to comfort her. He bent to nuzzle her cheek, and she nuzzled back, getting her heartbeat under control. The moaning of the twigjacks was real. No doubt it had caused her nightmares, but it also meant a real invasion was at hand.

Redfoot's mouth moved up her cheek toward her ear, and he whispered "Are you ready?"

Shadowfang steeled herself. She was the death-bell of Ward Ironbound. She had to remain in control in this fight; she had to be ready to sacrifice her honor, in the face of battle, to alert the next ward in that hers had fallen, if it came to that. "Yes.", she whispered back. Redfoot got up, and she got up in turn, and they oriented themselves. The moaning echoed off the gears, leaving no direction for their ears to find, but the stink of the twigjacks told them how her bed-gear had rotated. Shadowfang leapt to her right, unerringly landing on a gear of the next linkage, then the next. Redfoot followed, a leap behind her.

When they reached the wide structural ledge, all the lycor of her ward were there, as well as the party of monkey people from the Upper Gears. Everyone looked over to acknowledge the pair, then turned their attention pointedly to the rock wall built on the ledge. Redfoot joined them. Once no one could see, Master Fellwalker slid her a monkey-person rifle. Shadowfang uncocked it, then cocked it again; hearing this, the others relaxed, and Redfoot returned to her side. Master Fellwalker came over to hand him a rifle. There were only eleven rifles, so only a handful of lycor would wield them. Redfoot would because his mate would, and this was proper; but Shadowfang herself would wield one because it would make it easier for her to flee, and seeing her impending disgrace would be terribly rude.

Lacking claws, fangs, and hide, the monkey people would all be wielding rifles, so they and the rifle-equipped lycor went to set up toward the back of the ledge. Stilted platforms had been made to match the number of rifles, and each rifle-wielder laid atop one with their weapon, and a handful of belts in easy reach. Shadowfang was near the center, between Redfoot and Digger Quickeye. The bulk of her ward stood a fair leap ahead of the gunners, far enough back from the wall to dodge debris, but not far enough to give the twigjacks room to coordinate their movements. All that was left was to wait... and listen to the moaning.

They had only minutes to wait before the first twigjack began pounding on the wall. The moaning quieted, and by the third strike the twigjacks were silent. After the fourth strike, the other twigjacks joined in the pounding. The hail of blows fell a bit left of where the ward had predicted; the line adjusted, but there was no need for the gunners to move. Shadowfang aimed generally where the line was focusing, her other eye watching for a surprise breach. But the breach came under the heaviest pounding, and a bright crack of light speared through the rock wall. The monkey people clicked, their night-vision goggles flicking aside, and lycor eyes adjusted in a bit. Shadowfang and the other gunners took aim on the crack, not wanting to help the twigjacks open it, but ready to open fire at the first sign of bark.

When a twigjack hand poked through the widening crack, it was quickly chewed up by a short burst from each gunner; but something was wrong. The hand was loose, and it was bare greenwood, with no bark. Three more hands appeared, and gunfire chased them.

"Blood of the Architect, they have minions!" Quickeye stopped firing, and the other gunners stopped when they realized what he meant. A chill ran down Shadowfang's spine. These were not hands; these were not bark-kin at all, but some kind of green-kin, skittering in ahead of the twigjacks. More of the minions poured through the opening, but the lycor made short work of them. The minions could do nothing through lycor hide, yet a single claw's slash would cut them in half. White blood splashed the center of the line, but this was good; the lycor who most needed it could enter blood frenzy.

An actual twigjack hand appeared in the flow of minions, and was promptly cut up by gunfire. The twigjack moaned, this time in pain. But the pounding never stopped, and the wall weakened around the opening. The lycor tearing through the minions set themselves to dodge debris, and the hole fell wider. The gunners opened fire on the high mass of the first twigjack to come through, and the line swung in to tear at its trunk. One lycor looped back, keeping the few minions that escaped the debris from reaching the edge. The twigjack made a few swats at the line with its remaining hands, but the gunners were causing it the most pain, and they were out of its reach. The moaning reached a fever pitch, then fell off as the twigjack lost consciousness and collapsed. They had downed the first in record time, with no losses beyond

ammunition, and the line returned to shredding the minions.

The opening was now wide enough for the gunners to see past the warrior twigjacks, and they sniped at the high masses of the smallest. The twigjacks do not experience blood frenzy, and they become less fierce if they take losses. The flow of minions slackened, and the line pulled back a bit, trying to tease another twigjack out of their sunlit domain. The frenzied lycor began howling, trying to keep control, let the twigjacks come to them. One broke, charging the opening, and Shadowfang sent a single bullet over his head to ricochet off the rock. He ducked at this, stopping in his tracks, and fled back to the line.

But this was enough to pull the warrior twigjacks, and they tore down the rest of the weakened section. Gunfire chased over their high masses, but they didn't halt until they met the line. Bark flew, the lycor of the line tearing it off to get at the few low vulnerable bits. The moaning rose again. The edges of the line surged in, in time to catch a new wave of green-kin minions, and a few lycor deep in blood frenzy leapt over their kin to claw at twigjack shoulders. The gunners raised their lines of fire to avoid them, but there was plenty of high mass on a twigjack. Shadowfang paused to change belts, then resumed firing.

New twigjack fists thrust into the opening, smashing the shoulder-clung lycor, and destroying the shoulders they attacked in the process. Here were the great twigjack warriors. The moaning of the front few cut off as they were knocked into the mass of lycor, crushing them a half-dozen at a time. Shadowfang gritted her teeth. On a hunch, she switched from the great warriors' high masses to their eyes; these were weak, each bursting after a few dozen rounds. The other gunners followed suit. Lycor never attacked the eyes in melee, for the twigjacks could easily tear them from their high masses, but these rifles left no furry body within reach. Blinded, the great warriors were swarmed, and the gunners switched to blinding the other twigjacks now approaching the opening.

A new kind of minion skittered in over its fellows; this one was white, but clearly similar. When bitten in half, however, it exploded in a gout of flame. The minion blood coating the lycor caught fire. As the fire spread, several burning lycor charged through the opening, trying to catch some twigjacks before they died.

The thick smoke was clouding their lines of fire; unable to see their targets, the gunners switched to raking the opening at mass-height. Every lycor in the line was burning, but one by one they darted out into twigjack territory, trying to turn this new weapon back on its masters. A few minions got through, and the gunners at the edges switched to keeping them from reaching them.

Shadowfang changed belts.

The tide of minions was increasing, through no more twigjacks appeared. Lycor bodies burned where they lay, and if any of the line still lived, there was no sign. More and more of the gunners were keeping the minions from reaching them, and Shadowfang began to wonder if the twigjacks had left it up to their minions to finish off the ward, before sweeping in.

Then a twigjack appeared in the smoke. One of the great warriors had hung back, only now coming through. This one was larger than the others, much older. Seven gunners concentrated fire on its eyes, and though wood flew, it would take them time to chew through its age-hardened flesh. In the meantime, it stomped inevitably forward, its legs burning as it crushed minions by the dozen. That, too, would take time to harm it.

A minion appeared for a moment in Shadowfang's scope before exploding under her fire. She flinched - she was now coated, and all the twigjack had to do was light her. She resumed fire, determined to prevent that.

"Shadowfang!" It was Redfoot. She held the rifle still, letting her fire spray over the twigjack's high mass while she turned. Redfoot was waving frantically. She waved back to acknowledge. Then he yelled "Run!".

She flinched again. They had failed. Another ward had fallen to the twigjacks. She had to alert Ward Coppershaft, not only of the loss, but of the new weapon. Her eyes locked with his, and for a moment they remembered everything they'd had together... then she tore her view away and tossed him her rifle. He caught it easily, and with the great warrior so close he could shoot from the hip. Only two eyes remained, there was still hope... unless another twigjack came through. And there was always a forest of them. She scooped up her remaining belts and hopped down, tossing them up onto his platform, before leaping off into the gears.

She had done it.

Chapter 2: `

Shadowfang was near the border between the wards when she first saw another person, a lycor. She paused on a gear, and he landed a few gears down on the same linkage.

"What news from Ironbound?"

She looked through him to answer. "Lost to the twigjacks. They have a new weapon. Fall back."

He was taken aback, but recovered quickly. "Death-bell?"

She nodded sharply. "I am."

He averted his eyes.

And so it begins... she thought. "I need to get to Coppershaft." She leapt back the way he came before he could say another word.