

The Crows of Thunder Bluff

by

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The crows circled overhead. Sark Ragetotem did his best to ignore them. They always made him uneasy, like buzzards circling their prey. Sark lowered his gaze. He felt the heft of his favorite axe on his shoulder. He made his way across the central rise of Thunder Bluff, the tauren capital.

Thunder Bluff was larger than it appeared. Over six thousand tauren called the city home. And this city was unlike any other, built on four enormous plateaus towering hundreds of feet over the plains of Mulgore. Great bridges of rope and planks spanned between the four plateaus.

During the Third War, Sark had been chieftain of the great Ragetotem tribe; their warriors had few equals. Leading such an intense tribe, Sark had developed an aptitude for sensing trouble before it started. Something did not feel right and it had to be more than those damned birds. Sark peered out around him with his one good eye.

A cataclysm had recently torn the world asunder, yet Thunder Bluff was spared most of its wrath. Cairne Bloodhoof, High Chieftain of the Tauren, the leader Sark had pledged his tribe's loyalty to, had left on a diplomatic mission to Orgrimmar. That had to be it. Cairne was not in the city, and that made Sark wary.

A large group entered from across the rise.

Had Cairne returned?

Sark watched the group. It was not Cairne. It was Baine Bloodhoof, Cairne's son, surrounded by his personal guard. Some day Baine would lead the tauren. Sark had known the boy since his youth. He was as honorable as his father.

Baine met Sark's eyes for a moment from across the rise. The two nodded to each other.

An older tauren approached Baine. A woman. Magatha Grimtotem, Elder Crone, leader of the Grimtotem tribe.

Sark watched as Baine and Magatha spoke for a brief moment, then Magatha moved on.

Sark was glad to see her leave. The less contact Baine had with that crone... that Grimtotem, the better.

While several hundred Grimtotems made Thunder Bluff their home, the majority still lived within their own villages and were hostile to all other tribes. Magatha was not to be trusted, and Sark suspected she was only allowed to live within the city so Cairne could keep an eye on her.

Sark noted something else unusual about Magatha. She was quite possibly the most powerful Shaman in Thunder Bluff, yet she did not live with the other Shaman on Spirit Rise. Instead, her home was on Elder Rise with the druids, near Hamuul Runetotem, Archdruid of the Horde. Perhaps this was no coincidence. Perhaps Hamuul had been entrusted with watching her.

Baine and his personal guard entered the giant center spiral, an impressive piece of woodwork that connected the different levels of Thunder Bluff's central rise.

Sark continued on his way.

He entered one of the shops to browse their general goods.

A commotion suddenly erupted back at the center spiral. Someone screamed, a crowd was forming at its base.

Sark rushed toward them. He pushed his way through.

Sark glanced around. No one seemed to be at the heart of this. A young tauren caught his eye, the boy's face full of shock.

"Where is Baine?", Sark demanded.

"With the Wind Rider", the boy replied.

"What?"

"A Wind Rider arrived from Orgrimmar."

"Then what is wrong?"

"Cairne. The Wind Rider said he died. Something happened in Orgrimmar."

"How?!"

The boy didn't answer.

Sark glared at the boy, "If you are lying--"

"I don't know!"

The young tauren burst into tears and ran.

Sark stumbled away. Word was spreading around him. People were screaming. Had this happened? Had this really happened?

Sark's mind swam. This wasn't real. It couldn't be. He raised his head, the city around him falling into despair.

Then, in a flash of clarity, he saw it. He perceived what had made him wary.

"You fool", he thought, 'you old, useless fool."

Sark wanted to hate himself. It was obvious. Maybe not to others, but to a warrior it was plain as day. Within several feet of every city guard, there stood a Grimtotem, like a pack of wolves, preparing for attack. How long had they been there? Their dark fur helped them stand out. The normally benign Grimtotems

were now shadowing the city guard. Sark searched his mind to make sense of it. What were they doing? Observing? Waiting? Had the Grimtotem assassinated Cairne? Sark had to warn Baine and alert the guards.

The noon sun shone straight down.

The Grimtotems drew long, concealed blades. With the city in panic, no one noticed.

Sark saw the blades. His throat erupted, "No!"

There wasn't enough time.

The Grimtotems lunged. Blades found their mark. Guards fell, their throats slashed. The few guards who were fast enough, now desperately fighting off their attackers.

Time slowed. Sark watched. Only a split second had passed. With one simple action, the Grimtotems had effectively assassinated Thunder Bluff's entire peace keeping force when the city was at its weakest. This was planned. They had murdered Cairne while he was away. They must have. And now they planned to take the city.

Sark's warrior instincts shook him. He was chieftain of the fearsome Ragetotem tribe, himself a danger to anyone who attacked the city. He felt it behind him. He was being stalked. The shadow hovered over him. Sark gripped his axe. He spun. A guttural roar erupted from his throat as he cleaved his axe straight through the chin of the Grimtotem tasked to kill him. The assassin fell. Sark rose to his feet. He was alive. Thunder Bluff still had its defenders. Many of the shopkeepers had taken up arms.

Another Grimtotem charged toward Sark. He swung his axe striking the Grimtotem down. In his prime, Sark was one of the greatest warriors his people had ever known. He was old now, true, but he was not soft.

Sark moved to help the remaining guards, when screams erupted from a nearby building. The bridge-house, where one of the two bridges leading to Hunter Rise began. Hunter Rise, where his fellow Ragetotems lived.

Sark charged toward the bridge-house.

A pair of Grimtotems blocked his way. Sark slammed into them. The Grimtotems were a ferocious tribe like his own. Their weapons clanged. Sark caught a glimpse inside the bridge-house, a small group of guards fought to save the bridge. Sark pictured his people on Hunter Rise. Had they been attacked too? He pictured his children. Sark's vision went red. His axe met flesh as the Grimtotems before him fell.

Inside the bridge-house, a group of Grimtotems worked on severing the bridge while two other groups protected them inside and out on the bridge.

Dead tauren lay all around Sark. He joined the guards desperately trying to reach the bridge. The guards recognized Sark. His presence bolstered their resolve.

Sark and the guards pushed toward the bridge. They were almost there.

A shudder. A loud crack.

Out on the bridge, Sark saw his tribesmen rushing to help.

The bridge snapped.
Sark watched in terror.
His tribesmen fell. Some clung to the bridge, others plummeted to their deaths.

The Grimtotems on the bridge had sacrificed themselves to ensure their brethren would succeed.

Sark slaughtered the Grimtotem before him. The guards were cutting down the others.

The final Grimtotem, seeing he was alone, turned and dived off the plateau to his death.

Behind his rage, Sark felt a twinge of fear. The Grimtotem were zealots. Of what, he did not know.

Outside, the sound of the other bridges collapsing echoed through the city.
Sark turned to the guards who still remained.

"Form a wedge on my point!", he cried, "We go to Baine. If Cairne is dead, we will not lose his city. We will not lose his son!"

Sark emerged from the bridge-house with the guards.

A mob of Grimtotems turned to face him.

Sark's group punched through.

"To me!", Sark screamed, "To arms!"

The shopkeepers who had taken arms rushed to Sark's group.

Sark pointed to the central spiral with his axe, "Charge!"

Sark and his group ran for the spiral and began fighting their way up. Ahead of them, they could hear the sounds of battle.

Reaching the area where Cairne Bloodhoof's home stood, Sark saw Baine Bloodhoof with his personal guards, fending off a horde of Grimtotem.

Sark and his group rushed to join Baine.

Dozens of Grimtotems turned to meet them. Weapons clashed.

Beyond the Grimtotems, Sark could see Baine and his guards being pushed toward Cairne's home. Baine, every ounce his father. Was Cairne truly dead? Was this the new chieftain?

Sark knew one thing, as long as Baine lived, Thunder Bluff would not fall.

Sark yelled to his guards, "Break through! Protect Baine!"

Sark squeezed his axe. He had sworn an oath to protect Cairne with his life. That oath was now Baine's, and Sark would sooner die than see his chieftain harmed.

Sark screamed his battle cry. His axe cleaved through the Grimtotems' ranks.

Up ahead, Sark saw Baine's personal guards overwhelmed. Baine himself fought against three Grimtotem. Baine impaled one with his spear. He parried an attack and his spear shattered.

Sark desperately shoved forward.

Unarmed, Baine rushed into his father's house.

Sark could see through the entrance. Baine ran for the far wall. Above his father's chair hung an artifact handed down through generations of Baine's bloodline, the Eagle Spear. The history carved into the spear's shaft dated back over ten thousand years. It was an item of reverence. Baine tore it from the wall.

The Grimtotems dived forward to attack Baine's undefended back.

Baine turned and thrust the Eagle Spear through his nearest attacker. Pulling back the spear, Baine stormed from his father's home.

Sark had almost reached Baine. Sark watched as the Eagle Spear tore through armor, impaling every Grimtotem Baine set it to.

The Grimtotem surrounding Baine fell back.

Sark prayed to the Earth-Mother. The upper-hand was near.

A cluster of lances flew through the air. Sark saw them heading straight for Baine. A guard dived to block them. Too late. Baine moved to dodge.

A single lance sliced deep through Baine's thigh. Baine fell to one knee.

Sark cried out.

His warrior instinct suddenly screamed.

A spear pierced Sark's blind side, impaling him through his gut. He had let himself be distracted. Sark's mind cried, "Useless, stupid old man."

Sark fell. The Grimtotem wielding the spear grinned. Sark thrust the top of his axe into the Grimtotem's neck. Half blind, old man.

Another Grimtotem struck Sark before he could recover. Sark roared in pain.

A guard brought down the second attacker and moved to help Sark.

Sark yelled, "No. Protect Bai--!"

A sword crashed down onto the guard's shoulder, killing him. Sark stared up at the Grimtotem.

Blood gushed from Sark's wounds. His hand was shaking.

The Grimtotem brought down his sword. Sark grabbed the blade. He swung his axe, taking off the Grimtotem's head.

Sark collapsed in his own blood. His hands were growing numb. His axe slipped from his grasp. He rolled over and desperately pulled himself toward Baine.

A crack of thunder erupted within the battle. Guards sprawled through the air. They landed dead on the ground.

Sark searched for the answer. He saw a nightmare.

Magatha Grimtotem had joined the fight. The elder crone, the Grimtotem leader swept through the crowd, her shamanistic discipline surrounding her with a force of the elements. Guards toppled before her, blown aside, burnt, electrocuted.

The Grimtotems rallied.

Baine's guards fell back around him.

Sark struggled to reach Baine. His vision grew dark. If he passed out he knew he would die.

Magatha towered over Baine. The air around her pulsed with power.

Baine, "Why did you do this?"

Magatha, "We owe you no explanation."

Without warning, a bear charged from the crowd. The beast slammed into Magatha, knocking her down.

Sark looked at the bear, a hunter's pet. The Thunderhorn tribe must have found a way to reach them. But where was the hunter?

The bear stood.

Magatha glowered. Then before her, the bear shifted into the shape of Hamuul Runetotem, Archdruid of the Horde. The druids, a religion of shape-shifters.

Hamuul stared at her, "Tell your warriors to surrender, Magatha."

Above Hamuul, the crows of Thunder Bluff circled.

Magatha rose to her feet.

Several of the larger birds dove from sky. Landing next to Hamuul, they shifted into Tauren, fellow druids, Hamuul's tribesmen.

Hamuul, "We are vigilant."

Chain-lightning shot from Magatha's fingertips. The bolt hit Hamuul then struck the other druids.

Hamuul landed on his back. His brethren lay hurt beside him.

A pulse of energy erupted from Magatha's hands.

Hamuul rolled to the side, dodging a surge of molten rock.

With a growl, Hamuul's body shifted again, this time into a lion. He rushed into the crowd.

"Where is he?", Magatha screamed, 'Don't let him escape!"

Hamuul dove from the crowd behind Magatha, landing on her back. He had her by the throat, thrashing her body like a rag-doll.

Magatha sprawled out on the ground, bleeding.

Hamuul stepped back beside Baine. He returned to his tauren form.

Magatha cried out, "Don't kill me!"

Hamuul stared down at her. He reached down to Baine and took the Eagle Spear.

Magatha cowered, "You are a protector of life. Spare me!"

Hamuul shook his head, "I am not a protector of life, Magatha. I am a guardian of nature. Cairne Bloodhoof is dead, and nature demands balance."

Hamuul brought down the spear, impaling her. Magatha Grimtotem was dead.

The elder Grimtotem warriors cried for rally, but it was over. Their matriarch was dead.

The Grimtotems began to surrender.

Sark lay in a pool of blood near Baine and Hamuul. He could sense more tauren arriving around them.

A hand cradled his head. Sark looked up to see his daughter, Ker. She was a warrior like himself. She saw his wounds but she did not cry. Good girl. Much braver than he, just like her mother.

"Father", she said.

Sark was weak. He nodded back to her.
A shaman kneeled beside them and examined Sark's wounds.
Ker, "Will he live?"
The shaman set to work, "That is between him and the Earth Mother."
Sark stared up at the sky. The crows of Thunder Bluff circled overhead.
From then on, they would make him feel at peace.