

# Bane Attacks

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*by  
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When I was thirteen seasons old, Hasan, the leader of the Othel mountain people, came to our home and told my father and our Antaur men that the Banes were going to attack us. Thirteen seasons before that the Banes had attacked our village while the men were away. They had burned homes, stolen horses and women, and killed the male children. When our men returned, Banyon our leader, my father, promised the Antaur people they would never be attacked again. I had been told many times the story of the Bane attack and knew it well, although I had never heard it told in our house. It upset my mother--made her cry. This news of a new Bane attack upset my mother greatly. She went outside when Hasan talked of being an ally to my father; the Banes had raided the Othels many times. As my father gave orders and prepared to leave, I remembered how I begged to go with him. I was ripe thirteen! My mother had returned to help my father; and when she heard my pleas, she grabbed my father's arm and gave him a look such as only a wife and mother can. Hasan just laughed. "With Banyon alone the Banes will worry. Lord's fear for them if his son comes, too!" he roared.

My father planned to attack first the Bane men who were camped in the woods, and on the following night, raid the Bane village. Hasan agreed with him that they could destroy them. That very night they killed many of the Bane men and returned in early morning for fresh horses and food. They also returned so that their beloved leader could get rest and medicine, for an axe

had made a deep cut in his thigh. When our Antaur men rode their horses up to the house my mother, as always, restrained herself from running out to meet her man; but when Hasan and another big Othel helped my pale father from his horse she flew to him. Helping my mother and Hasan strip him and dress his wound, I saw that the meat of the thigh was still deep red. Hasan pointed to its deepest part, "See here where it wants to turn pink and runny?" My mother nodded, knowing that that was the part that had to be kept clean. I wanted to ask my father if I could go with Hasan on the village raid, so I touched his forehead to ask; but he was damp and burning, and my mother pushed me gently away so she could sponge him.

I went out to the main room to ask Hasan, who was standing with his shoulders rounded, staring at his hands. He took one look at me and shrugged, "Your father is already asleep." I continued looking in his eyes. Pushing back the blanket that separated my parent's room from the main one, Hasan leaned in towards my mother and whispered to her. At his words she hesitated, then nodded and returned to sponging the grimacing face of my father. Hasan came out and spoke in a sotto voice, "He's in a great deal of pain;" then he clutched my shoulders as if he were going to break me. "Your father taught you to fight well--he, he has no fear." I remembered Hasan laughing at me earlier, and I swore to myself I would be like my father.

As I readied my father's veteran stallion, a small but fast chestnut, I asked myself if I could be like my father. I thought the right questions put to my soul would test me.

My father praised his men but never spoke of his own prowess. He did not need to, for all the men of all the peoples told how keen his aim was, how strong his arm, how accurate and swift he was. Two stories of him were so famous that almost any teller told it word for word as it had been told the first time. The first story told how he tamed his magnificent war stallion. The horse had been young and mean. Its owner promised to give it to anyone who could ride it. My father had the horse driven into a barn, and he shut himself in with it for three days. Without a saddle or bridle he rode the horse out of the barn on the fourth day and not a welt or cut marred its sleek body. I still remember the handsomeness of that animal. As long as that stallion lived, he was as faithful to my father as a dog; and even on his dying day, no other man could approach him. The second story told concerned my father's prowess in battle. He had thrown an axe with his left arm, not even helping to swing it with his right, and had sliced a man's head off so neatly the victim did not even scream.

Hasan led the way to the Bane village on his ugly-headed, shaggy pony. We lined the overhanging ridge that was so very close. Hasan, wordless before, now spewed out instructions as we all nodded our heads and watched. I tried so hard to listen, but I could not help but be distracted by the rumblings inside me. In a phrase--I did not feel brave. I doubted my swiftness, my aim, my strength, when it came to killing the blond Bane men my own age that I saw walking below us, bare chested and carrying evening water, wood and hay. Nor did I feel brave when I looked at the golden haired women with children clutching the folds of their skirts. We could all smell sweet foods baking in the homes. And I felt the least brave when I saw their leader, handsome as my father, smile and kiss his war horse on the muzzle. Breaths before we attacked, Hasan turned to my father's good friend and said, "I

hope the flesh of Banyon's thigh stays well;" then he turned to me, clutching my neck. "I hope your father truly sired you."

Hasan yelled, "Yurragh!" and the voices of his men howled with him as we shot into that drowsy Bane village. I wanted to stay close either to Hasan or our Antaur men who loved my father and thus me, but my horse thrust its haunches into the earth, ears flattened, teeth snapping, and raced ahead, ignoring my persistent tugs on the reins.

Around me, the Othels set fire to the houses, and our Antaur men clanged their swords and axes against Bane's and shoved Antaur spikes into the chests of Bane horses. I looked for someone to tell me what to do, but the faces around me were snarling. Suddenly a naked Bane sprang before me and circled his axe over his head, cursing. I still do not know how I knew to move, but I chirped shrilly to my horse and made it lunge forward, swinging my axe to meet the Bane's. The handles locked and we tugged at them—he trying to pull me off and me trying to push him down. It was stupid of me to push on him, but I knew if I freed my axe he would swing at my waist or leg. Thank the lords my father's chestnut had fought before. He reared and turned towards the Bane to bite and strike at him and we succeeded in knocking the man against a barrel. His pale stomach exposed, I sank my axe into his soft flesh. I had to clutch onto my horse's mane to remove it; I know not whether the blade was stuck in his bone or the barrel's wood. Killing him I still remember vividly--the others not at all.

When the fighting was done and the village was lit with burning homes I became aware that my ears, deaf while fighting, hurt from the piercing cacophony of screaming women and children. I sat idle on my chestnut. Hasan, with much impatience, yelled at me as if I were a stupid peasant, "We must kill all the males!" Hasan galloped towards a little boy that was stumbling about and twisting the ends of his nightshirt. The mother, tousled, with a man's spike ran towards the boy yelling, "Run, run, run!" She stood before the child and faced Hasan. "Beast! Beast!" The force of Hasan's galloping horse and the thrust of his arm made his spike run through them both at once. I looked at the bloodied woman with her hair in blonde waves and could not help but think she looked much like my mother.

On the way home, a pale sun and cool breeze made my horse repeatedly break into a bouncy trot, as if we had merely gone for a brisk morning gallop, and he had heard the grain dropped in his bucket at home. I would look at the sky and pale green leaves, then turn him off the path to shady spots of soft grass where I would sit and vomit yellow.

I joined Hasan in the front. He scratched the shaggy neck of his pony and told me about his youngest daughter. He poked me, laughing, "She'd be the kind of wife you would enjoy." Then he paused. "Your mother is most beautiful. Though, I still think my eldest daughter is more so. I tried again and again to get your father to take her after his first wife was killed, but for some reason he wouldn't have her. Why he took your mother--a Bane--and married her, I still don't understand. He's always said, though, she's a good wife." A violent attack of hiccoughs came on me. Hasan told me to hold my breath. Pummeling me hard on the back he asked, "What's wrong with you?" With hiccoughs persisting I asked feebly, "My mother is a Bane?"

He looked at me amazed that I had not realized my mother was the only blonde woman in our Antaur village, then he roughly caressed my stubbly chin. "When your father was young," he said, "he was as randy as a young,

high-strung stallion. Then his first wife started popping up wherever he was, her face all smiles. She was always cooking for him. At 15 she was a true Antaur beauty--dark-eyed, ivory-skinned." Hasan laughed. "After they were married, your father told me she was really a terrible cook and a fair housecleaner. Seemed like all she could do was laugh and follow him adoringly. It only mattered to him that she loved him. His men and mine were on a hunting party to celebrate the birth of his son when the Banes attacked your village. Remember last season when we killed that she-wolf and we heard its mate howl?" I nodded. "You covered your ears. I wanted to cover mine when your father saw his son on the end of a spike and that beautiful woman of his naked and battered, hanging in his burned doorway. He moaned and howled just like that wolf."

Hasan continued. "When we attacked the Bane village I knew he had lost his wits when he took your mother. Raping her in front of her husband--their leader--well, that I understood. But marrying her as if she wasn't a war prize, especially when she despised him so, I couldn't understand. I offered him my eldest daughter!"

I corrected Hasan, "My mother is a good wife."

"Yes. She even began to love your father while she was bearing you."

I knew my mother loved him a great deal. When my father was home, he spent much of his time with her; she planned her days so she could spoil him. In the evenings, she would cook for many, usually the single men and the widowers; and when the food was in place with everyone sitting, she would stop behind my father's chair and bend over his head to kiss his nose. She sat on his right, and he would hold her left hand and watch her for several minutes, then finally let it go to eat. All the men would smile in appreciation of her. Many times I had seen my father carry her into their room with that look in his eyes that men get. I echoed Hasan's words, "She even began to love your father . . .," and I tried to picture him raping her with others holding her hands and feet. I was sick.

Once home, a string of men went in to my father who was now sitting up. My mother placed food before me. I ate greedily, though I told her I was not hungry. Saying nothing to me, she occasionally stopped to touch my hair or kiss my cheek. I wanted to jump up and hug her saying, "Hasan killed a Bane woman that looked so much like you. I'm so sorry for what my father did to you. How can you love us? How can I make things right?" But not even the words I formed in my head sounded complete, so I sat in silence until she told me my father wanted to see me.

My father looked white and clear complexioned like men do when they've been drinking a great deal of water. Motioning me to sit beside him on the bed he said, "Hasan told me I truly sired you." He wanted to tell me he was bursting with pride; but those things can not be said well by fathers; so I babbled about the goodness of his veteran chestnut and its boldness in battle. My words made my father's eyes sparkle; he loved his horses. Sitting there, I thought how it had only been a season or two before that I had sat at that same spot on his bed. As I lay in his arms he would stroke my hair and tell me stories of princesses and good men on white horses who conquered bad men with a just death. After I had grown quite sleepy, my mother would come in to put me to bed; but he always carried me to my room and kissed my mouth after he'd laid me on the pillows. I finished my talk of his horse, and

he roughly hugged me against him. Very, very quietly, as if there was so much of it it caused him pain, he said, "I love you, son."

My mother had been standing at the door, and she motioned me to leave him. I kissed her good night, and she closed the blanket behind her. I knew she would shed her clothes and join my naked father. In my own bed, I listened to them whispering and to their bedclothes rustling, while I tried to fight sleep. Sometimes the eyes have impressions burned in them, and shut eyelids make the impressions re-appear; but sleep won that night without a skirmish.

I awoke early the next morning from the sound of a brush going through my mother's thick hair. She was naked before me with her dress draped over a chair; evidently she did not want to wake my father. I had never seen her unclothed before and I watched through squinting eyes her firm, pink breasts while she braided her hair. Her figure made me recall the throatiness that Hasan had used when he'd said my father had been "as randy as a young, high-strung stallion." Thinking about Hasan's youngest daughter, I hoped she would look as good as my mother, and then I noticed on Mother a thin, white scar below her right breast, the kind made by a sharp blade. The sight of it made me jump and stiffen and I wanted to run to my mother and enfold her in my arms so I could promise her our village would never be raided again.

Two seasons later I married Hasan's daughter. It deepened the ties between the Antaurs and the Othels and enabled me to leave my parent's home. Oh, I desperately wanted to leave after that first time in battle. The days after it I spent fighting in words with my father, testing the authority he held over me like a young stallion wanting to gain the herd. I know now, even as I knew then, that the arguments were rooted in the feelings I had when I saw my mother's scar. After seeing it, as soon as she finished dressing and left the house, I went to my father. He was asleep on his stomach with his face turned towards the wall and I stood and watched the breath go in and out of his body. Oh, I had to leave home . . . for on that morning when I stood and watched my father peacefully breathe, I almost . . . I almost killed him.