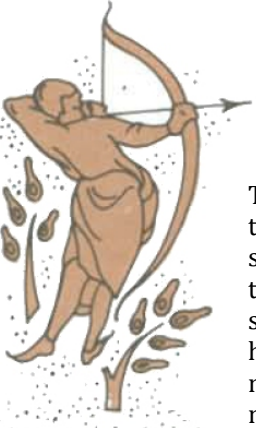




The Tale of Debrinn



The tale of the war in Onnwal is written upon the face of my brother. Two terrible years of slavery have worn deep lines of grief and pain there. Five more years of fear, suspicion and strife have set hardness in his dark eyes that I have never before seen. He is like a stranger to me and as I stand before him, his spear tip at my throat, I can see I am a stranger to him too.



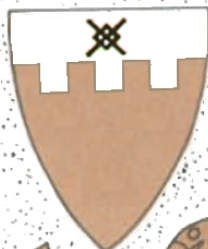
Seven men of our village bar the path that leads up from the river to the huddle of thatched huts we once called home. Four carry spears; two more axes; another an antique crossbow that once belonged to his grandfather who served as a Marine. Each of them I know by name. Each now glares at us as though we were mortal enemies rather than neighbours and kin returned from exile.




"Go back from where you came. There's no place for you here no more", the man who is my brother says.

"Hildern, don't you remember me? Debrinn, your sister," I ask.

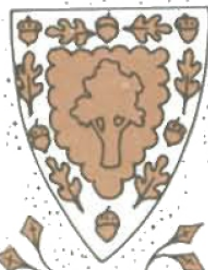
Hildern looks at me - through me - with his hard black eyes. "You look like my sister, but she left us years ago," he said. "She could be dead and you an impostor, a spy for all I know."




"Hildern - I am your sister. Remember how we played by the river? How I nearly drowned once in a summer flood and you saved me? Remember..."



"The Strawhairs have many ways to loosen the tongue and steal the secrets of the heart. If you are my sister, find a priest who can weigh the truth of your words and we will listen. Until you do - don't darken our door. Now begone!"



Hildern, my brother, was always stubborn, but never cold like the man he has become. The Scarlet Ones have stolen the love from his heart. In a land where priests were hunted like vermin by the Brotherhood, men of faith are scarce and troubled with greater matters than weighing one woman's words. We may as well seek the Crown of Aerdy as seek for a priest. My brother knows this and does not care.



"I will do as you say, Hildern, because I am your sister who loved you and never stopped loving you for one moment in seven years - not even now. I shall return," I say, tears welling in my eyes. I turn and the pale, thin faces of my companions swim before me.

For us the path leads only one way - back along the river to the fortress town of Kildeer. The last time I saw my home was seven years ago - a glimpse over my shoulder as we fled

through the twilight to the ship that carried us over the sea to Nyronnd and safety. In that terrible scarlet summer, traitors and assassins raised their knives in the name of the Scarlet Sign and stained the Green and Gold of Onnwal with the blood of their victims. In the two years that followed, the people of Onnwal died in the fields, died beneath the lash, died in Brotherhood's "cleansing" fires, while in Nyronnd we exiles desperately sought tidings of our tortured homeland. When news came of the Brewfest Rebellion, when Free Onnwal arose to throw off the shackles of the Scarlet Tyranny, we rejoiced. Yet the war was not won, nor is it yet. It consumes the land like a plague fever, destroying all it touches, sapping the strength of the people. Only now, after seven years have we returned - to be greeted with spear points and suspicion, instead of the joy and tears we had seen so often in our dreams.

Now as we wend our way back to Kildeer, the wind in our faces carries the sound of a bell echoing out over the fields from the town. Before the Occupation the priests of the Pursuer had a chapel in Kildeer. Upon every Godsdays the song of the great sliver bell of the chapel would peel out over the town and the fields beyond. Seven years ago, the priests buried the bell beneath the chapel before they retreated into the hills to fight, vowing to return and reclaim it. The Brotherhood burnt the chapel with the rest of the temples, but the bell lay hidden and safe beneath the ruin. After the Rebellion, the first priest to return - though he was blind and bent by age - dug through the rubble and charred wood, till he found that bell, cold and whole beneath his searching hands. When the fire of war first burnt our land, each of us buried something precious deep within our hearts where the flames could never touch it. Hope, pity, trust, love - a great treasure trove lies buried within every Onnwalon. Only when the Green and Gold, which the soldiers that march and drill beneath Kildeer's walls proudly carry as their standard, stands supreme once more over Onnwal will we be able to dig down and bring that precious horde back into the light. Only when we are free, can we begin to live again.