

Fodder

‘Stop that noise, you lumps of cow dung!’ hissed a guard who emerged into the firelight holding a shuttered lantern in one hand and a hardwood cosh in the other.

The soldiers sat around this particular campfire were a mixture of seasoned campaigners and others called greenhorns, men who had not tasted battle in all its murderous glory. Every man had his head bowed waiting for the guard to pass, and, as he did, each soldier made a rude gesture behind his back. A gesture, if seen, would warrant several lashes of a whip. Finally, the guard moved on, and the men’s conversation sparked back to life.

Gobin was the son of a servant and what the men called a greenhorn. He had earned his place at the fire as during the march he had felt the whip for one of his comrades. Keeping his mouth shut and taking the punishment earned him respect among his peers, and his peers were grizzly, battle-hardened foot soldiers. Most of the twelve men sitting around the campfire had fought in and bore the scars from several battles and Gobin was eager to learn from them. If any man survived more than one battle, then his advice was worth listening to.

Before the guard’s interruption, the men were reminiscing about old times. The conversation continued.

‘You remember the battle at Dererdon?’ asked one man who had a long scar running down the left side of his face and was creatively nicknamed Scar.

‘Scar, you weren’t at Dererdon.’

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

'Damn right I was, Stinky. I was the one who dragged your rotten carcass from the battle when you fell from the ladder, remember?'

'And how the hell would I remember that, you dumb son of a mule, I was out cold.'

Raucous laughter from the others greeted the comment.

The soldier named Stinky leaned forward and patted his friend's shoulder. 'Aye, I know what you done Scar, you know I'm only joking.' Stinky turned to Gobin and smiled. Now, Gobin knew why he was called Stinky. The man's breath was so foul it could down a herd of cows at twenty paces and his teeth were virtually nonexistent, only a few brown stumps remained. 'This man here watched me fall, what was it Scar, huh, three storeys high?'

'More like five,' replied Scar, stealthily swigging some strong alcoholic drink from a leather canteen. He had to be careful; ten lashes from the whip was the punishment for any man caught drinking while marching.

'Yeah, you're right... Anyhow I fell and -'

'Landed on that rock-hard head of yours,' interjected another tall weathered-faced man named Dunk.

Stinky faked laughter. 'Ha ha, you prick,' he snapped at his comrade. 'Anyhow, I was knocked out.'

Dunk leaned forward talking to Gobin but staring at Stinky with a mischievous smile. 'Actually, truth be known, it was not his hard head or large ass that saved him, you know what did?'

Gobin shook his head.

'Well, he landed and crushed a poor man named Lalan, a greenhorn like you.'

'The idiot tried to catch him,' added Scar, giggling like a child.

'Try or not, the fool died cushioning Stinky's fall.'

Gobin turned and looked at Stinky. His eyes widened when the shameless older man pulled an innocent face and nodded.

Brian G. Murray

‘I didn’t tell him to stand there, but bless his soul,’ Stinky made a sacred sign, ‘He’s gone and here I am. Lucky for me, he was soft,’ he added beaming a smile, but it was a forced expression.

Scar shook his head. ‘Then I came charging in, dodging boulders and arrows,’ he said, deepening his voice to heighten the tension. ‘I grabbed him and dragged him clear. Then moments later... BOOM! A large boulder slammed where he had been lying. He would have been squashed paper thin, if it weren’t for me. Damn, Lalan was a bloody mess, couldn’t tell if he was man or beast. And for my trouble, you know what happened? I damn well pulled my back.’

‘Yeah, while I recovered and joined the next charge, this lazy puke was resting,’ added Stinky mockingly.

‘I pulled my back,’ hissed Scar, narrowing his eyes. ‘You still owe me.’

Stinky held Scar’s gaze, then the corners of his mouth twitched and he boomed a rich belly laugh. He reached across and slapped Gobin’s back, sending the young man lurching forward. The fresh scars on his back stung and he could feel blood trickling – he had to brave the pain or lose face. Stinky was the reason he’d got the lashes. During the march, the older man had called an officer a derogatory name behind his back, but the officer did not know who had called him it. Thinking Gobin would give up the person, he was pulled from the column to receive the whip. Gobin knew who had said it, but knew the unsaid laws of the army, one being, never snitch on a comrade – that was one of the worse crimes. Stinky was about to give himself up, but Scar stopped him. The scarred man wanted to see if the greenhorn had any honour and pride. Stinky remembered that the young man did not even look his way when the officer shouted at him. Nor did he give him up when he received the lashings. Instinctively, Stinky knew the young man was someone to look out for and he did, allowing him into their group.

‘And he reminds me of this every time we prepare for battle... Remember you owe me, remember you owe me...’

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

Like a nagging old woman, you owe me.’ Stinky’s face suddenly went serious. ‘And I pay my debts, my friend. I have your back.’ The two men looked at each other and Scar nodded.

Suddenly, Stinky snapped out of his melancholy and turned his attention to Gobin. ‘So what’s your story, laddie?’

Gobin felt nervous with everyone looking at him. ‘Nothing to say really.’

Stinky leant forward, turned his head and glared at Gobin through his one good eye. ‘Now you listen here, laddie, from this moment on, we’re your friends, your family, your goddamned lovers. We’re the ones who will be protecting your rear, us. And we in return expect you to watch our backs, protect us the same way you would your friends, your family or lover. Now, to put us at ease we want to know who you are and, more importantly, whether you will have our backs. Me, I am the son of a whore, spawned from one of several unknown clients. I spent most of my youth on the street getting work where I could, or thieving when I couldn’t. At twelve summers I killed my first man with my bare hands. The man was attacking my mother and, for me, that was enough reason to kill him.’ Stinky raised his large shovel-like hands and mimicked strangling someone. ‘I was offered a choice, either the noose or the army.’ He shrugged his massive shoulders. ‘So, here I am and here I’ll stay until I’m dead or too old to march.’ And Stinky meant it in that order. He was now institutionalised within the army and death was preferable to him than the dreaded word retirement.

Gobin could not believe what he had heard and in the flickering campfire, saw Stinky in a different light. ‘What happened to your mother?’ asked the younger man.

Stinky turned away and Gobin suddenly felt guilty. The big man took a deep breath, wiped his nose on his sleeve and sniffed. ‘So, what’s your story?’ he countered, ignoring the younger man’s question.

Gobin shrugged. ‘I’m the son of a servant –’

Brian G. Murray

'Son of servant,' sniggered an annoying young man named Parker who sat on the fringe of the group. 'Bet you're here seeking adventure, to escape your boring life, to find riches. True, right?' Parker roared with laughter.

Gobin glared at the man, who was everything he wanted to be. Parker was tall with broad shoulders tapering to his waist, stood on thick, muscular legs and had shoulder-length dark hair pulled into a tight ponytail. Gobin was tall but lanky with frizzy, untameable hair and bowed legs. 'I decided I wanted to better myself. I did not want to be anyone's possession. I want to earn respect and wealth.'

'Well said, laddie,' replied Sticky, clenching his fist. 'Well said.'

'I want riches, fame and women,' snapped Parker trying too hard to get attention and gain acceptance.

'Nothing wrong in wanting a wife and settling down. I hear the women here are...'

'I don't want a wife,' interrupted Parker smugly, faking laughter, sounding like a demented donkey. 'I just want women. I'm told there's nothing like rutting with a woman when the blood is high from killing and the sounds of battle surround you, right?'

Stinky narrowed his eyes. 'You mean -'

'Yeah, you know,' added Parker, nodding with a huge smile and groping his groin. 'And -'

'Enough!' roared Stinky, surging to his feet. Parker instinctively rose. 'We're soldiers, proud and true. And we do not, I repeat, do not rape women.'

'But -' Before Parker could finish his sentence, Stinky threw a thunderous right uppercut. The punch connected on Parker's chin, snapping his mouth close and shattering several teeth. The blow lifted the young man from his feet, and he flew beyond the cocoon of flickering, orange light from the campfire and landed in the darkness with a thud. Growling with rage, Stinky stepped over Gobin and followed Parker's flight. Scar joined him.

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

From the sounds of fists and boots pounding flesh, Gobin felt lucky he could not see the punishment they were handing out. He was not squeamish, he just did not like to watch someone, anyone, receiving a beating. *Why am I here?* he asked himself. *Why?*

After several minutes, both veteran soldiers returned with grim faces and resumed their places. Scar took a swig from his leather canteen then threw it to Stinky. The grizzly man deftly caught it and drained the contents. He turned and looked at Gobin.

'There's nothing worse than men who harm women and children. The world would be a better place without men like him.' Stinky hawked and spat thick, green coloured phlegm into the fire that hissed in protest.

Gobin studied the big man, noting his bloodied knuckles and boots. He nodded in agreement.

'And there's nothing wrong in being the son of a servant, you hear me, laddie, nothing and you be proud your father is earning honest coin. You stay close to Scar and me, and we'll make sure you see your poppa again, that's a promise.' Gobin nodded. 'I know what you did for old Stinky during the march and I remember who I owe,' he added, tapping his temple with a finger. 'I will give you a piece of advice that will help you in the days to come.' Gobin leaned forward eager to absorb the advice. 'Don't eat onions before you go into battle. There's nothing worse than having onions repeating on you when you're killing a man, it's vile.'

Gobin frowned.

Stinky roared with laughter. 'Only joking, laddie. Listen, remember this if nothing else – make sure you're not the first up a ladder nor –'

'What the hell is this?' interrupted a raging voice from the darkness behind Gobin. The shouting drowned out Stinky's words, but Gobin read Stinky's lips and frowned. He had been taught how to read lips by his father as it was a talent many servants learnt so they could discretely spy on their master's guests. Did he read the older man right? His thoughts were

Brian G. Murray

interrupted when three guards rushed into the orange orb of campfire light and glared around.

The officer in charge shook his head. 'Stinky, I might have known you would be here.'

Stinky shrugged his shoulders and rose. 'Greetings,' he countered jovially.

'Did you leave that unconscious man out there?'

Scar rose to his feet. 'It was not him. I did it. The stupid man owed me coin and would not pay up.'

The guard, a man named Polen, ignored Scar and stared at Stinky. There was an obvious hatred between the two men and the tension in the air made it almost palpable. 'What was it this time, did he say you smelt? Well, it's true you do smell like you've been sleeping up a cow's ass and were recently dislodged.'

'I said –' started Scar, trying to remain calm.

'I was not talking to you, you damn idiot, so sit down before I beat you unconscious. You remember how that feels?' hissed the guard not taking his eyes off Stinky. Scar slowly crossed his legs and sat down, his eyes spitting venom. He so wanted to beat the guard to a bloody pulp, but just held his rising anger in check. 'So, what was it?' repeated the guard.

Stinky growled but forced a smile. 'He told me he had rutted with you – how many times was it Scar? Oh yeah I remember four times. Must be sore, huh? Is that why you walk like you do? Anyhow, I was trying to protect your honour. Cannot have men going around telling others how much love you're getting. It's not decent, bordering on being rude if you ask me.' Polen stepped forward, his eyes aglow with anger. Stinky did not budge. 'I was protecting your honour,' he added faking innocence.

Someone seated in the group sniggered.

'Shut up or you'll all taste my cosh!' screeched Polen, his voice several tones higher than normal. 'Stinky, you'd better hope he does not die, else it's the noose for you. Actually, I hope the boy dies. Then I will personally tie the noose around your neck.'

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

‘That’s the only way you’ll be able to beat me, huh, with my hands tied together like a scrawny, pot-bellied pig. By the way, I hear you like pot-bellied pigs. Is it true their sows are not safe around you?’ he added, gyrating his groin back and forth.

Polen lunged forward and slapped Stinky as hard as he could.

The bigger man did not flinch. He licked blood from the corner of his mouth then stepped forward so his nose was almost touching the guard’s beaked nose. He lowered his voice to barely a whisper so only the guard could hear him. ‘A bitch slap, huh? Is that the best you got? You’d better hope I do not see you during this battle or I will shove your prized cosh so far up your ass, you’ll be using it as a tooth pick. And believe me when I say you better hope the enemy get you and kill you quickly. Me... well let’s just say it will be worse than the last beating I gave you.’

‘Enough!’ screeched Polen. ‘Threatening a guard is a crime.’

‘Ah, but you need witnesses to such a crime, and if such a crime had happened I am sure these fine, handsome soldiers would testify.’ All the soldiers stood and glared at Polen. Each then shrugged his shoulders and turned his back on the guard, a unified act of defiance.

‘Arrest him,’ hissed Polen, his face flushing. ‘Twenty lashes at dawn for you. Take him away.’ The other two guards stepped forward, but Stinky just glared at them and they backed away.

‘I’ll see you in the morrow chaps,’ said Stinky conversationally. Then he walked off as though taking an evening stroll. The incident quashed the evening jollities and the other men around the fire bade farewell then went to find their bedrolls. Only Gobin and Scar remained.

Scar slowly shook his head. ‘Damn thick-headed fool. He had time to clean up, but he wanted to be caught.’

‘Why?’ asked Gobin.

Brian G. Murray

‘Why –’ Scar shook his head. ‘Coz he did wrong, and wrongdoers should be punished, the honourable, old fool.’

‘How long have you known him?’

Scar smiled dreamily. ‘Long before you were an itch in your poppa’s pants, boy.’ Silence was broken by the crackling fire and settling camp.

‘How did you get your scar?’ asked Gobin, uneasy with the quiet.

Scar chuckled. ‘I could tell you a tall tale of gallantry and skill but that would be a lie. The truth is two... no three campaigns back I was drunk and started a fight over a whore, well I think it was about a whore, to be honest I cannot remember. Anyway, I remember punching an officer – actually the officer was Polen, you know, the guard who just arrested Stinky. I was beaten by four officers then thrown head first through a window. This was the result. Lucky really; it could have been my throat.’ Scar chuckled mirthlessly.

‘What?’

‘It was Stinky who stopped them from continuing their *fun*. He cracked some heads that night, including Polen’s. I was told that Stinky beat them into submission. Then in front of a large group of soldiers, he pissed on them, announcing he was marking his territory. Ever since, Polen has held a grudge against Stinky, wonder why... Anyhow, after, Stinky carried me to a healer and got me fixed up.’

‘But he said –’

Scar interrupted, seemingly reading the younger man’s mind. ‘I know,’ he said, ‘he owes me. We’re friends, actually sword brothers. And we owe each other countless times.’ Scar fell silent. ‘You better get some rest, boy,’ he said, suddenly sounding old and weary. ‘Tomorrow will be a long, long day.’

Gobin rose and studied Scar’s craggy face. ‘Good night,’ he said with meaning.

‘Good night and wake with either good luck or a strong arm,’ replied Scar waving him away. ‘Never ask for both.’ This was a soldiers’ superstition. They believed that each soldier could receive good luck or a strong arm from the gods.

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

But if a man asked for, and got, both, then another soldier would not get either. Greed and selfishness were things these soldiers would not tolerate.

Without saying another word, Gobin left the old man to his thoughts.

Gobin walked through the camp, the temporary home for over thirty thousand men, men about to attack a fortress called Atton. He stopped at the edge of the camp and sat down. Thoughts tumbled over in his mind rendering sleep almost impossible. He stared into the darkness and a picture of his father grew in his mind. His father was a respectable man with tired, sad eyes. And he was intelligent – a trait he hid from most. He was a man who knew he had achieved everything he ever would and was too old to change his ways. Gobin wanted to be different and his father wanted his son to better himself. Like Parker had said, Gobin did want adventure, but did not expect to be a foot soldier. With the Master's children, Gobin had been taught to read, write and do numbers. He thought he would join the army and help with logistics, become an administrator, away from the actual fighting, yet travel with the mighty Kelkarn army who were undefeated under their almost mystical general, and see new lands and cultures.

His father did not try to stop Gobin, only told him to return home in one piece. Gobin now wished that his father had insisted he stay. Instead of becoming an administrator, and because he was of lowly born status, Gobin was drafted as a foot soldier and to make it worse, he was put into a company affectionately known among the men as the 'fodder'. The company were the men who charged the wall first, hence the army's fodder. He was in the company of men like Stinky, Scar and Dunk, uneducated men who would never strive to be anything except soldiers. Gobin was different... different, was he? What made him different from the others? Stinky was honourable, proud but not educated – was that such a failing? Did being educated make Gobin better than him? Gobin

Brian G. Murray

shook his head. He knew Stinky was no failure and was probably a better man than Gobin could ever be.

‘What am I doing here?’ he whispered as tears welled in his eyes. ‘You dumb son of a bitch.’ He should be at home helping his father, learning an honourable trade. Soldiering was, is, an honourable trade. But even before his first battle, Gobin knew he was not a warrior. No, he had to survive this battle to keep his promise, return to his father and restart his life afresh. Gobin nodded. ‘I will survive.’ But even as he said the words they tasted like a lie, acrid and bitter.

‘Stick with Stinky and Scar,’ he muttered. ‘They’ll make sure I survive.’ Gobin nodded confidently. After all, they had survived many battles and sieges – they were invincible.

For hours, Gobin sat in the same position, staring into the distance, tired but not sleepy, his mind churning various what if’s. The first rays of dawn silhouetted the horizon and Gobin knew he should return to his bedroll, become a soldier and get ready for battle. He rose and walked back through the camp. On the way, he saw men crowding together and inquisitiveness got the better of him. He clambered up onto a flatbed wagon so he could see what was happening. He shook his head. *Typical*, he thought.

Stinky stood bare-chested, leaning against another wagon, gracefully wiggling his butt from side to side as though dancing. ‘People, I want him to use his whip, but not *his* whip if you know what I mean,’ yelled Stinky smiling. The others who were gathered roared with laughter. ‘Come on, you defiler of pigs, give me your worst.’

Gobin stretched his neck and saw Polen’s face – it was flushed an unnatural red. He raised his whip and cocked his arm back.

‘What’s all this?’ commanded a voice, a voice that demanded attention. Everyone stopped and stepped back. It was General Gilallan, a small wiry man, but his voice was powerful, belying his size. Like a ship slicing through waves, men parted and let the general through. Then Gobin thought

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

he saw something strange – the general smiled when he reached the middle.

‘Stinky, I might have known you would be the centre of a ruckus in my camp. What have you done this time?’

‘He –’

The general raised a hand that stopped Polen in mid-sentence. ‘Unless your name is Stinky, which I somehow doubt, then stop speaking or you’ll taste my whip.’ That was no idle threat; that was a promise. ‘Now, please Stinky continue.’

‘A man disrespected our army, sir, and I taught him a lesson.’

‘Lesson,’ shrieked Polen. ‘He beat a man unconscious for no reason and should get twenty lashes. If it were up to me the foul man would be hung. He’s a stain on our great army.’

The general closed his eyes and took a calming breath. He beckoned over a captain and whispered something in his ear. The captain nodded. ‘You, come with me.’ he said gesturing at Polen.

Polen frowned and pointed at himself. ‘Me?’

‘Yes soldier, you – now!’

With a shocked expression, the guard looked at the captain, at the general who still had his eyes closed, at Stinky who was smiling then back at the captain. ‘But –’

‘Now!’ growled the captain. The guard bowed his head and walked from the circle of silent men, all of them wanting to, but none dared laugh.

The general exhaled, opened his eyes and looked at Stinky. ‘Now, where were we – ah yes, you causing a ruckus in my camp.’

‘Yes, General. The man disrespected our code.’

‘Our code,’ repeated the general, raising a questioning eyebrow, hiding a smile.

‘Yes, General. We fight for the just and righteous. We defend the innocent and incapable. We will not harm anyone who does not bare arms against us. And we never harm a woman or child. Our code – The Kelkarn Code.’

Brian G. Murray

‘And?’

‘And the man said he wanted to harm women – rape them.’

‘Hmm.’ The general clasped his hands behind his back and stepped closer to Stinky. ‘Now you have put me in a bit of a dilemma. You are right about our code. But you rendered one of my men unconscious, leaving him incapable to fight, and that cannot go unpunished.’

‘No sir,’ replied Stinky, his voice strong and proud.

‘Scar!’ called the general without turning, knowing the soldier would be present.

‘Yes sir,’ replied the disfigured man, stepping forward.

‘I believe the punishment for such a crime is twenty lashes. Please continue.’

‘Yes sir. Someone give me a whip.’ Gobin could not believe how calm Scar and Stinky both appeared. Someone handed Scar a whip and with a flick of his wrist he unravelled it. He looked across at the general.

‘Will you need something to bite on?’ the general asked Stinky.

‘No sir,’ replied the grizzly man, offended.

The general smiled and nodded towards Scar. ‘Proceed, soldier.’

Scar motioned as though throwing something and the leather whip snaked in the air then snapped forward, striking Stinky’s back with a loud crack. The merest grunt escaped Stinky’s lips, the only evidence of his pain. Four more times Scar used the whip and marked Stinky’s back with dark welts.

The general raised his arm. ‘That’s enough. After all he was protecting our code.’ The small man approached Stinky and lowered his voice. ‘And I cannot have my biggest pain missing another charge, can I?’

Stinky smiled. ‘No sir,’ he replied, not showing any signs of discomfort.

The general flashed the smallest smile then without another word turned on his heels. ‘Men, let’s prepare for war,’ he ordered and marched away.

The men cheered and rushed off.

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

Gobin watched Stinky and Scar approach him. Scar saw the younger man and beckoned him forward. Gobin jumped down from the wagon and scampered up to them.

‘Go and find a healer quickly,’ requested Scar.

‘I don’t need a healer,’ grimaced Stinky.

‘Do as I say, boy, and quickly, we don’t have long before we’ve to line up.’

Gobin scurried off. Behind him, he heard a whip crack loudly and someone screamed – Polen was getting his comeuppance and the young man could not hide a grin.

The morning was clear and crisp with thick dew covering the green pastures – a perfect morning for farming with the sun rising slowly, predictably. But the men marching across the fields were not here to cultivate crops, they were here to kill.

Gobin could not believe his eyes and a breath caught in his throat. He had heard men talking about the wall that protected Atton but to see it... Wow! The stone used was dull grey and smooth, so smooth you could not see the joins between the blocks; the stonemasons who built it were artists. Now Gobin understood why the ladders were so long; the wall was huge, at least three storeys high, topped with a crenulated battlement lined with soldiers, their polished metal helmets and weapons glinting in the morning sunlight.

A messenger had already been sent to the gates to find out the Attons’ answer. They wanted to fight.

‘They look like a game lot, huh, Scar,’ sniggered Stinky who stood to Gobin’s right. Scar, on Gobin’s left, did not answer; he stared at the wall, his expression unreadable.

‘It’s impossible to breach that wall,’ whispered Gobin. He could not believe anyone would want to attack such an awesome, formidable structure.

Stinky, who had bandages wrapped tightly around his torso under a baked leather breastplate, chuckled softly. ‘Laddie, walls were built to be breached. This one is no different; it’s just a different challenge. You know what I mean?’

Brian G. Murray

'No,' replied Gobin, dragging his eyes away from the wall and looking at Stinky who was grinning.

'You remember, laddie, stay close to Scar and me, you hear.'

Gobin nodded then turned and stared at the wall, still in disbelief.

From their right, the general came into view, riding a chariot pulled by two black stallions. Unlike the rest of his men, Gilallan was dressed in civilian clothes – a simple woollen tunic and leather leggings. He reined in the two black horses and smiled.

'I see you're here, Stinky,' he called casually.

'Those little tickles would not stop me, sir. Scar must be losing his touch.'

'Is that true, Scar?'

'No sir.'

'I think you're telling a white lie, Stinky.'

'Never!' barked Stinky. Then he quickly added 'Sir!'

'Of course not, soldier.' The general nodded proudly. Stinky was one of the few men who had been in every one of Gilallan's victories. Gilallan had offered Stinky a promotion more than once, but Stinky had always refused, claiming he was Fodder. If he was honest with himself, he was terrified of the responsibility and happy just being a grunt. 'Step forward and tell everyone our oath,' asked the general.

Pushing out his chest and holding his head up high, Stinky stepped forward, turned and faced the men. 'Kelkarn, *we!*' he hollered.

'Ho!' the entire Kelkarn army roared, the sound rolling on and on.

'We fight for the just and righteous.'

'Ho!'

'We defend the innocent and incapable.'

'Ho!'

'We will not harm anyone who does not bare arms against us.'

'Ho!'

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

‘And we never harm a woman or child. Kelkarn WE!’

‘Ho!’

The general nodded. ‘Yes, our code, ‘we will not harm women or children’. Yet, those Atton bastards invaded our lands, yes our lands, and plundered innocent villages, our villages, raped women, our women, and took children, our children, Kelkarn children to sell into slavery. That, gentlemen, cannot go without reprisal. You are the weapon for our revenge, and vengeance will be ours. Kelkarn!’

‘*We!*’ roared the army punching their weapons into the air.

Stinky took over the call. ‘Kelkarn!’

‘*We!*’ roared the army as one.

‘Kelkarn!’

‘*We!*’

Even Gobin’s blood was fired up and he gripped his sword hilt tighter, turning his knuckles white. A roaring filled his ears, and his eyes were wide with nervous anticipation. He felt scared, but excitement coursed through his veins, dulling his fears. He did not remember Stinky returning next to him.

‘You ready, greenhorn?’ asked the older man smiling.

Gobin nodded.

‘I said, *are you ready?*’

‘*Ho!*’ screamed Gobin, his face turning bright red.

‘*Charge!*’ hollered the general, pointing towards the wall.

The thousands of men collectively known as the Fodder surged forward as one, ready to fight, ready to kill and ready to die. Gobin grabbed the ladder to his right, and with twelve other men, lifted it and raced forward shrieking their battle cries. Gobin did not remember much about the charge to the wall, trudging over the churned ground. He did not remember arrows arcing in the air, skewering attackers around him. He never realised how close death came, almost kissing him as an arrow whistled past his face missing by a mere finger’s width. He did not remember planting the base of the ladder on the ground.

But at that moment, the red mist cleared and he looked up.

Brian G. Murray

'Move it!' shouted someone behind Gobin. His eyes widened and Stinky's words boomed in his head. *Make sure you're not the first up a ladder!* Fear clamped Gobin's heart as someone shoved him. 'Move!' He was the first!

Gobin reached up and stepped on the first rung. The sounds of the charge vanished. His shallow breathing and heartbeats boomed in his ears. Gobin took another step up, then another. His palms were coated in sweat from fear. A defender peeked over the lee and looked down at Gobin. Suddenly, the defender stood and raised a large rock above his head. But before the Atton could throw it, an arrow slammed into his neck releasing a plume of blood. The defender's rock slipped from his fingers and fell harmlessly to Gobin's left. Harmless, except the boulder crushed a Kelkarn who was waiting to climb the ladder. Gobin climbed another rung. Another Atton peeked over the lee. Quickly, he ducked back. Then before Gobin could step up another rung the Atton reappeared, this time bearing a bow with an arrow notched. The man pulled back his bowstring. Gobin closed his eyes and guessed when to sway to his left. He moved quickly. He got it right. The arrow flew pass Gobin, but slammed into the skull of a man below him. The Kelkarn pitched off the ladder and two more were killed where he landed with a squelchy crunch. The Atton archer reappeared but as soon as he did, three arrows thudded into his torso and he slumped forward hanging over the lee, dripping blood.

Gobin straightened, took a deep breath and climbed another step up. Arrows, criss-crossed in the air, and some from the Kelkarn archers clattered into the wall above Gobin. He looked up and saw the archer's body twitch then slide forward. He frowned then quickly realised that other Attons must be pushing the archer to use the corpse as a weapon. This horrified Gobin for two reasons. Firstly, he thought the other Attons would have kept his body for a fitting burial or pyre. But secondly, and more importantly, he would have to avoid the falling body, a large object. The body snagged on something. The defenders pushed harder. At first the body

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

did not budge then suddenly it came free. Their power, however, caused the body to sail over Gobin's head, and those on the ground saw the danger just in time, moved and avoided being crushed. Gobin swallowed and took another tentative step up. His eyes were wide, waiting for someone else to appear above him, waiting for a boulder to knock him off, waiting for an arrow to skewer his flesh; he stepped up and up, waiting, waiting, but nothing. The higher Gobin got, the more nervous he felt. He held his breath convinced death would strike – still nothing. He was now nearly at the top of the ladder.

The Kelkarn archers stopped firing in case they hit their own men. Gobin realised the increased danger and quickened his pace. Two rungs from the top, as instructed, he drew his sword, swung it round, pointing it above him ready to stab up. He reached where the ladder rested against the wall. He could now see city of Atton.

The place was all constructed of the same grey stone as the wall, giving the place a drab, dull atmosphere. Most buildings were only two storeys, all with crenulated eaves surrounding flat roofs, all except for a towering building near the centre of the city capped with a golden dome.

Before Gobin could fully appreciate the architecture, a defender emerged before him holding a single bladed axe aloft. Both men screamed at the same time – the defender hollered a battle cry while Gobin shrieked with shock. Instinctively, Gobin closed his eyes and lunged up. He felt his sword tip crunch into something. He opened his eyes and saw blood flowing down his blade, the tip buried in the defender's mouth. At the second attempt, Gobin yanked his sword free and stepped up. Blood from the dead Atton splattered onto Gobin's face, but he ignored it, he had to reach the battlement.

Another defender stood before Gobin, a very young man with bright blue eyes, not old enough to shave, but old enough to wield a sword. The young defender swung wildly underarm trying to bring his weapon to bear. But he stood too close to the crenulated eave, a novice's mistake, and his blade clanged

Brian G. Murray

loudly against the granite sending out a shower of orange sparks. Gobin's chance... Screaming, he stabbed forward. Time slowed. He saw the defender's eyes widen. Gobin watched his blade pierce the man's eye, felt it grind against an eye socket then clunk on the man's helm at the back of his skull. Gobin stepped onto the lee, pushing the man back. The defender slid off Gobin's sword and fell back, knocking into another soldier, unbalancing the man. That gave Gobin enough space and time to step onto the rampart. He had survived the climb and the fable was shattered – the first man to climb a ladder always died. Gobin had made a mockery of the saying. Now all he had to do was survive the fighting – easier said than done.

Gobin felt someone shove him in the back.

'Move along, laddie.' Gobin recognised the gruff voice and his heart leap for joy – it was Stinky. The man stomped next to Gobin, quickly followed by Scar and with a roar they charged at the defenders. Gobin hesitated for the merest moment, then followed them into the melee, hacking and slashing.

All along the wall, the Fodder were doing what they did best – they were fighting like men possessed, maiming and killing but also dying. The fighting was utterly vicious and within minutes the rampart was stained, and slippery, with the blood of both defenders and attackers. The battle ebbed and flowed. Along the wall, parts were about to fall, but reserves charged forward and sealed the breaches with brutal efficiency. In other parts, the attackers were easily repelled, only to force their way back on.

Gobin, Stinky and Scar fought within a group of twelve men. At no point since reaching the wall were they at any risk of losing their advantage. In fact, they formed an arc around, and protected two ladders so other Kelkarns could join them. Gobin's shoulders, arms and back ached from constantly swinging his weapon. His legs throbbed, moving back and forth, and he was ready to collapse with exhaustion, but exhilaration and fear fuelled his throbbing limbs, keeping him

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

moving, fighting and killing. He had lost his sword, embedded in a soldier who had toppled over the wall, dragging the weapon from Gobin's grip and he now fought with a single bladed axe.

Before him, Stinky and Scar were mighty. They fought back-to-back, turning and killing with total efficiency. Stinky's mace was, like the massive man, covered in blood, whistling death. Some of it was his, very little, as most was from Attons he had killed, crushing heads, torsos and limbs. The pair forced their way towards a stairwell; their plan was to cut off the reserves, thus giving the Kelkarns a chance to capture this section of the wall. They were close, very close. Round and round the pair turned, killing and injuring. Then...

Gobin's eyes widened with shock. Scar staggered. An injured defender, given up for dead, had one last lunge in him and thrust his blade into Scar's guts. Give him his credit, Scar killed five more men before blood loss weakened him too much and he collapsed, falling to his knees then pitching sideways. Realising his friend was injured, Stinky roared and swung his mace with extra vim. Others helped force the Attons back, and Stinky had time to pause. He dropped his mace and fell to his knees. Tears tumbled freely from eyes.

'No, no, no,' he muttered, lifting and hugging his friend. Gobin reached Stinky's side and knelt next to him. 'Scar wake up, please wake up.'

Gobin grimaced. 'He's gone, Stinky. I'm so sorry.'

'No! You're wrong. Wake up, Scar. Clyde, please wake up.' When his friend, his sword brother, did not answer, Stinky threw his head back and screamed. The sound of his emotional pain caused several Kelkarns to hesitate and they looked around. Many of those who paused died and the Attons pushed others back. Pushed back until...

Stinky moved his friend, resting him into a sitting position against the lee with his sword resting on his legs. He gathered up his mace and rose. Rolling his neck, he stepped forward with Gobin one step behind. Stinky stopped and looked back at Gobin.

Brian G. Murray

‘Sorry,’ he said softly.

‘What for?’

‘For once it seems I cannot keep my promise.’ With a primal roar, the grizzly man charged into the fray, knocking his own men out of the way to reach the Attons. Gobin remained at Stinky’s side for a few heartbeats, but soon the warrior was surrounded by Atton, shouting and cussing, maiming and killing.

‘Come on, you feeble bunch of pot-belled cowards, old Stinky’s got something for you. COME ON!’ The sound of Stinky’s voice was quickly swallowed up by the din of battle. All around metal clanged against metal, men screamed in pain, filling the coppery tainted air, beckoning death.

Gobin fought as bravely as everyone else, receiving several cuts and grazes, but nothing life threatening. When Stinky and Scar were beside him, he had felt invincible, but now his mortality grew and a fear gnawed in the pit of his stomach. He felt himself being forced forward and he killed another Atton, a young man, too young. Gobin hated himself for it, but had no time to grieve or to dwell on his actions as another Atton ran at him. After several clashes of weapons, Gobin, swayed to his left and in the same motion hacked out. His axe crunched into the man’s helm, denting the baked leather, crushing his skull.

Over the din of battle, from beyond the wall, a horn blared.

Gobin felt some hope – it was retreat call. He could not see it, but most of the Kelkarns had been forced off the wall, except for three pockets. Gobin edged backwards, feeling terrified; he wanted to live but could not turn his back on the defenders. He knew the Attons would just stab him in the back; they all lacked honour. Gobin was at the ladder, ready to climb down, when he saw a comrade fall. It was Dunk. An Atton stood over Dunk ready to stab down.

Without thinking, Gobin charged forward screaming, ‘No!’ He blindly swung his axe as the Atton lunged down.

At the last moment Gobin’s axe blade ploughed into the man’s side, knocking the man aside, but the Atton’s sword still slammed into Dunk’s chest, killing him. Seeing he had failed,

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

Gobin, roared and swung his axe again. This time his blade nearly hacked an Atton's head off, sending his victim barrelling off the wall. Gobin swung his axe wildly left then right to keep the Attons back then threw the weapon at them. He did not see the blade lodge firmly into a defender's torso. Instead, he swiftly stepped backwards and reached the ladder. He climbed over the crenulated lee and suppressed a smile. He felt safe, turned and began to climb down. Three rungs down, he looked up. His breath locked in his throat. Safety seemed a lifetime away. An Atton, wearing a snarling smile, born of wicked pleasure, glared at Gobin, holding a boulder above his head.

Stinky's face grew in Gobin's mind and silently said something. It was what he had said back at the campfire when Polen had interrupted.

Make sure you're not the first on the ladder. Now the ending made sense. And make sure you're not the last.

Gobin was the last and an easy target. The Atton's smile grew and he raised the boulder higher, ready to throw it. Gobin wanted to jump, but his body refused, fear kept his grip tight. Suddenly, the Atton twitched. Gobin's eyes widened.

The Atton's face twisted in pain and he toppled over to one side, dropping the boulder onto the wall with a loud thud. Then Stinky appeared on the lee.

'I always keep my promises, laddie, now get going,' shouted Stinky with a broad bloody smile. 'You're not the last, not this time.' Without another word, Stinky turned and with a roar charged into the Attons.

Gripping the outside of the ladder with his hands and feet, Gobin slid down, a few splinters stabbing his hands – injuries he could live with. Breathing a deep sigh of relief, he reached the bottom of the ladder then sprinted across the open ground. He raced towards men facing the wall pointing. Gobin slowed then stopped, turned and looked up. On the wall, Stinky was fighting alone, surrounded by Atton's. He was a mountain of a man, his blood covered mace swinging and hammering into anyone who got close.

Brian G. Murray

Then the Attons stopped attacking. No one, including Gobin, could tell that Stinky was injured, dying, losing blood from many fatal wounds. He opened his mouth...

Stinky fell on to one knee and took several deep breaths. 'You think these little scratches are going to stop me, you inbred peasants,' he hissed defiantly.

'Stinky!' someone shouted from beyond the wall.

The grizzly man recognised the voice of the greenhorn who had taken a whipping for him during the march, the young greenhorn he had just saved. He looked across at Scar's body and smiled. 'See you soon, my friend,' he whispered. Stinky found strength in hearing his name. He may be the last attacker on the wall, but he was not going to die without a fight. With a grunt, he stood and raised his mace above his head. '*Kelkarn!*' he screamed then charged forward.

Every Kelkarn including Gobin let their voices be heard for a true hero, a true warrior. '*We!*' came the thunderous response.

Stinky was instantly swallowed by Attons, but he killed many before he finally fell.

Like the saying goes, the last attacker died.

Gobin stared in disbelief, he could not believe Stinky and Scar were both gone. After several minutes, he trudged back to the camp; tears filled his eyes and tumbled free.

The old man opened the door and peered out. The young man looked older, weathered and exhausted but realisation was immediate and the old man swung the door open. Tears flowed down his creased cheeks as he stepped forward and drew his son into a deep, stifling hug. 'Gobin,' he whispered between sobs, still not believing, hoping just hoping it was not another dream.

'Yes Pops, I'm home,' replied the servant's son. 'I am home.' After a long emotional moment, they both entered the house. Gobin paused at the door and looked out. Again he

Siege Warriors - A Fantasy Anthology

remembered seeing Stinky standing on the Atton wall, surging towards the enemy alone – one man against an army, the one man who changed the course of the battle. It was his action that gave the Kelkarns additional heart to fight, to fight and win. ‘Thank you,’ whispered Gobin softly. Slowly he closed the door, closing a chapter in his life, a chapter full of blood, screams, pain and death. Now he was ready to start anew with a fresh appreciation of life, knowing life was something precious.