

(Excerpted from *The Siege of Antrell*, by Clyde Wolfe)

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The kobold directly in front of him hissed through its reptilian dog-snout and jabbed with its spear. The gesture was an act of intimidation and menace, the kobold not yet brave enough to attack. Behind it, the creature's fellows hissed encouragement, shaking their own crude weapons.

To a lesser man the threat might have been a genuine concern. Wolfram stood there, eyes boring into the twitchy creature, waiting. The lead kobold gibbered as it poked again at Wolfram with the battered and chipped end of its weapon. The kobold opened its snout and barked.

From behind Wolfram came the nervous tittering of Alvan Denbar. The obese merchant had hired Wolfram as an extra guard for his meager caravan as it made its way to the city of Alasar from the town of Kerich.

"Oh will you do something!" the fat merchant whined, fearful more for his shipment and the loss of coin if he could not bring it in than anything else.

Two other men, hired muscle Wolfram knew only by sight—he named them Lumpface and Foulmouth for their respective failings of looks and halitosis—came up from the rear of the wagons to flank Alvan's jiggling bulk. The pair wielded cudgels large enough to be considered clubs.

Wolfram continued to stare down the kobolds. The lead creature jabbed again, a look of perplexity falling across its countenance; the human just stood there. Kobolds were not known for mental acumen, but it knew the human should either be reaching for the weapon sheathed at his waist or cowering in fear. Inaction was not something the kobold understood. Behind, its companions were jeering. It was going to have to kill the man; if not, there would be no end to the torments of its broodmates.

"Don't just stand there, you imbecile!" Alvan howled. "What do I paid you for?"

When the kobolds hissed in unison the fat merchant jumped behind his regular guardians with a whimper. Lumpface and Foulmouth had taken their time coming to the front from the rear of the three-cart caravan and seemed in no rush to involve themselves.

With the seven of its broodmates urging and cajoling, the kobold finally struck. The creature's reach was shorter than a man's, but, barely arms-length away, it should have scored a hit as it thrust forward the blunted spear. Instead, the hapless creature found itself pulled from its feet as the man moved faster than expected. Wolfram stepped into the thrust, catching the haft of the spear as it passed his body and yanking hard. With a yelp the kobold flew through the air and landed at the feet of Alvan's regulars; the spineless merchant diving into a nearby bush.

The kobolds were shocked into silence. Only after steel flashed and two of their number were beheaded did the spell break and the remaining kobolds lurch into action.

Wolfram kicked one in the back as it turned to flee, knocking the child-sized reptile on its face and skewering another on the length of his sword. The snarling wolf's head of the pommel connected firmly with the skull of another and the kobold dropped twitching to the earth.

One intrepid creature managed to scrounge up the courage to take a poke at Wolfram's unprotected back as he cut down another of its kin. The spear found only air as Wolfram, glorying in the thrill of the fight, sidestepped the thrust, again taking hold of the haft and tossing its wielder. Wolfram slashed another through the face. Before the corpse hit the earth Wolfram chopped down another enemy.

Only three of the would-be raiders remained; including the one Wolfram had thrown in Alvan's direction. Steel flashed and there were two.

The other kobold squeaked in fright and turned on its heel to run, as if hell itself had opened. It made four paces when something slammed into it from behind. The creature tumbled over the dusty ground and rose up in a panic. It took two steps before a sudden weakness robbed its limbs of strength and it tumbled forward once more, dead, a knife hilt buried deep between its shoulder blades.

The first kobold sat up and shook its head. It had a moment of lucidity and time to squeak before Alvan's guardsmen ended its existence with their heavy clubs. The entire ordeal was completed in the span of breaths.

Shaking and sputtering, Alvan extricated himself from the bushes. The brown wig the merchant wore to conceal growing baldness was askew. Sweat ran down his face in rivers.

Wolfram checked the desire to chuckle at the comical appearance of the fop. Instead he wiped his blade clean of kobold blood on the tattered loincloth of a fallen creature and replaced the weapon at his hip. Already Lumpface and Foulmouth were returning to their posts at the rear of the wagons. The drivers, as pasty white as their employer, relaxed their grips on the reins. After a lengthy tirade from Alvan they set the horses to continue the journey.

"You fools," Alvan whipped at the lead driver with the man's own reins. "Leading us into a trap. Could have cost me a fortune."

Not likely, Wolfram mused as the excitement of the brief exercise abated. *Three wagons of useless trinkets hardly constitutes a potential fortune.*

Taking up his position as point man for the journey, Wolfram quietly begged the fates to bring them swiftly to Alasar. Too many more days in the merchant's company would wear swiftly. What had possessed him to take up this job? The coin was welcome and needed, but Wolfram had no shortage of methods of replenishing the coffers.

Nonetheless, he was at least on the road toward his destination. His own travels would not end in Alasar, like the merchant's. Wolfram had many miles to go before his journey would be complete.