

# The Fastest Blade

A Panos short story

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This story takes place in the Panos universe, in between '*Another Stupid Apocalypse*' and '*A Princess of Last Resort*'. It may contain minor spoilers.

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*'What would Toby do?'*

Wendell repeated the four word mantra in his head, looking for some measure of inner peace as he laced up his trousers. He tried to push away the ever-present anger that had plagued him since he was a teenager. But the truth was, he wouldn't *be* in this situation if he was following in the hoofsteps of his former minotaur mentor.

He wouldn't have taken a leave of absence from his duties unless it was for something damned important. He wouldn't have travelled hundreds of miles on a restless whim. The Order of the Snow *always* came first in Toby's heart. And the paladin's dedication to Aro-Remset, Panos' god of fair battle, never waived.

Since Toby would never have taken the time off to enter such a competition, he wouldn't have made it into the third round of the National Duelists Competition. He wouldn't have to weather the suspicious stares, the muttered accusations of cheating. He wouldn't have to put up with the disbelief and cries of "foul" every time he won a bout. He wouldn't be sitting all by himself in a tent that had been defaced with inked scrawlings of '**midget**' and '**flea**'.

Then again, Toby was never a wererat.

The tiny paladin combed claws through his short gray neck fur as he stared into a little handheld mirror. Perhaps an act of vanity... but he convinced himself that he was just trying to present his Order in the best possible light. As bad as public reaction to his participation had been thus far, it would certainly get worse if he walked out onto the field of battle looking like a vagabond.

He glanced up when he heard a faint whistle. A human's head poked through the tent flap, bald as a coot but sporting a long, majestic ginger beard.

"Two minutes, Dervish."

It was Jorry. There was nothing but respect in the Master of Ceremony's voice. He was one of the few people who knew Wendell's history; his true pedigree.

Most of the civilized fight aficionados of United Diben, the host city for this year's competition, had no idea who the rat was. But some of the veterans remembered his performances in the remote, frozen city of Ice House. A decade and a half ago, he was a teenage star in the 'red circus', participating in quasi-legal bloodsports for coin and glory. That was where he earned his moniker: The Dervish. It was a moniker that hadn't been spoken aloud for nearly a generation.

Wendell murmured, "Thank you, Sir Reven."

The human disappeared without another word.

He stared into the little square of reflective glass once more. His whiskers twitched. His whiplike tail made a brief appearance above his left shoulder.

He wished that someone far more wise than himself would give him a hint. How should he handle this situation? The hostile crowd, the shunning... it was getting to him. But he only had the man in the mirror. Still... maybe a little pep-talk would settle him.

"You're the worst paladin I know."

Not a great start.

"...but battle is where Aro-Remset is glorified. The only way to get closer to him is to get closer to the edge. And you *need* to get closer to him. You need **something**. So forget these moronic, dung brained, inbred yokel wastes of space."

He paused for a moment, quickly reminding himself to avoid being that abusive on the tournament field.

"Forget them. And do what you're best at."

The wererat in the mirror stared back at him. It was a dubious stare.

He tossed the mirror onto his bedroll with a little snarl.

The horn sounded, calling the competitors out for the next round. Wendell plodded out into the bright sunlight.

The lush grass was warm between his toes. Unlike most of his competitors, the wererat shunned combat boots in favor of bare footpads. He liked the extra traction that he gained from his hind claws gripping the soil. He was far less worried about having his toes stepped on than he was having his head caved in.

Each bout was fought with wooden practice blades. It continued until the first hit was scored above the knee, and excluding hands and forearms. Intentionally blocking with off-limit body parts meant immediate disqualification, though attempting to pin the flat of a blade to the ground with one's foot was acceptable. Leave the rope circle that defined the ring and you were disqualified, though you couldn't intentionally pick up and throw your opponent out of bounds to achieve victory.

As Wendell approached the clearing where battles took place, the booing started. He grit his teeth, fangs showing white over thin black lips. He didn't *want* to let them know that he cared about their jibes. But he lacked the self control to simply ignore his detractors.

He distracted himself by looking off to his right, to the humble wooden booth where all of the officials sat. In the center was Sir Jorry Reven, a privateer who'd been knighted in multiple kingdoms for his efforts during the Harrington war. He was officially retired, but not a single competitor would want to face either his blade or his trident if they were wielded in anger.

On the right was Sanabella, the raven haired half elven druid who served as the tournament's safety officer and healer. She was a regular at these events. Even the oldest of humans had a hard time recalling a National Duelists Competition that wasn't blessed by her talented, caring hands.

And on the left, a far more unusual sight... a massive white furred yeti. Every yeti's name was the adjective that best described them, so it was somewhat of a comfort to know that this one was called Observant. His crimson-rust colored eyes watched Wendell's approach with genuine curiosity. Observant's role was as the Bard of Record. Sometimes the action was so quick at these events, illusion was required to review critical moments. Enchantments on the practice weapons would let the creature know the moment that a legal hit was scored.

As Wendell hopped over the thick anchor-rope that defined the fighting arena, a **massive** cheer went up. He looked across the green field to see his opponent approaching. He was a big human, clearly a hometown favorite from the number of shoulder slaps he was receiving. His short, curly brown hair bounced with each step he took. His smile was enchanting. His body was lithe.

The combatants shook hands and then picked up their wooden weaponry from the judging booth. The human opted for a medium kite shield and curved scimitar. The rat took up his small buckler and a longsword nearly as long as he was tall.

Sir Reven announced the bout, his booming voice easily reaching not only the nearby crowd, but likely half of the adjacent city as well. "Andre Strider versus Sir Wendell Hines."

The roar of the fans upon hearing their hero's name nearly drowned out the subsequent boos when Wendell was mentioned. He snarled softly, but managed to restrain himself.

Unleashing a series of withering curses at his detractors certainly wouldn't win him any friends. Instead he squared his shoulders and waited for the noise to die down.

Sanabella raised her hand. Her green eyes swept the area, a last second check for any hazards or interference that might endanger the participants. Then her palm cut through the air and she said, "Begin."

The human charged his smaller foe. He spun at the last possible instant, his practice scimitar just a blur as it cut through the air. The man's intent was to finish the fight quickly. But there was nothing for Mr. Strider to connect with. The wererat simply wasn't there.

Toby once told Wendell: 'You're only as fast as your eyes.' The big bull meant that even if you didn't have the fastest hands in a fight, you could still win. You could anticipate your opponent's moves through their body language. You could distance yourself or apply raw power at the right times, knocking your foe off balance. But it all started with the eyes. Observation before offense.

Wendell completed his roll. He started the evasion mid-spin, within the fraction of a second that the human's back was to him. Claws dug into the pitch, arresting his momentum. Then he sprang towards the overextended warrior, leading with the tip of his blade.

The duelists clashed, human on the back foot as he barely managed to defend against the wererat's precise strikes. Just when things looked like they were about to equalize, the smaller man put a sudden injection of pace and power into one of his forearm blocks.

There was a sharp *crack* as Mr. Strider's blade fragmented against Wendell's buckler. An instant later, the tip of a wooden longsword pressed gently under his chin.

Observant calmly announced, "Touch. Sir Wendell Hines is the winner."

Silence fell over the crowd. The paladin expected booing to follow soon after.

Instead, a robust laugh split the air. Andre, as good of a sport in defeat as he was in victory, reached down and hauled Wendell up into the sky. Holding the wererat above his head, he shouted, "Huzzah!"

The response from the hometown fans was instinctive.

**"Huzzah!"**

Confused by his sudden altitude change and the apparent endorsement from a local hero, Wendell blinked owlishly. Only after a couple of seconds did he gain the presence of mind to halfheartedly wave his sword in recognition. A ripple of laughter passed through the crowd.

Once he was back on his own rear paws, Mr. Strider shook his hand vigorously. The lithe man said, "Well now that you've beat me, go win this thing."

His earnest reply was, "I'll try. Thank you, sir."

For the first time since he arrived at the tourney, Wendell walked back to his tent without having to pin his ears back to shut out the sound of an unfriendly crowd.

As he was splashing some water over his face, the tent flaps rustled. A voice said, "Hey, that was pretty kind of Andre."

The accusation was out of his maw before he could rein it in, "**You** put him up to it, didn't you?"

Sir Reven stepped into the little enclosure. He said, "Not the result of course. But I *did* mention to a couple of the lads that the crowd was giving you a rough time."

"So if I happened to win, make a show of it."

The bald man shrugged. He said, "Well, yeah. Paladins make awful villains, Sir Hines. We'll have at least a couple of heels left in the top eight though, don't you worry."

Wendell's tail lashed uncertainly. He asked, "Why do you care?"

The man stroked his crimson beard, "Well, you want a good balance between people the crowd can cheer for and-

The rat cut him off. "No. I mean, me. Why do you c-

It was the human's turn to interrupt the smaller man. "Because I wasn't always a hero, Sir Hines. I dare say I know more about the pains of playing the villain than most."

Wendell was left to ponder what exactly that meant as the human slipped out of his tent.

Then it hit him: *Top eight*. He'd made it to the quarterfinals.

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"Sir Wendell Hines versus Madam Zirketh."

As the pair faced off, the afternoon sun threatened to disappear behind a set of angry gray clouds. Wendell supposed that darkness would suit the elven assassin *just* fine.

He immediately felt a pang of regret. That kind of stereotyping wasn't appropriate for a paladin of Aro-Remset. She wasn't **necessarily** an assassin. She was a 'bounty hunter' among the wild elves of the southern forests. She happened to dress all in black, wield a pair of wooden short swords, and shave her head to the quick so as to leave no obvious evidence at the scene of her... bounty hunting.

Sanabella's hand sliced through the air. "Begin!"

Both combatants quick-stepped forward, meeting in the middle of the rope circle. Wendell dug his hind claws into the soil, bracing for the first pair of blows to meet his blade and buckler. The elf's spindly arms gave her a slight reach advantage, despite possessing shorter weapons. She rained down her fury, probing for openings in her smaller opponent's defenses.

Spying a slight change in the Lady Zirketh's posture, the wererat relaxed the grip of his feet and started to circle. He made his first offensive move, a lightning quick slash to the elf's left thigh. She managed to parry, but just barely. She hopped back and started to circle with the paladin, staying right at the limit of her effective reach.

The next minute was filled with blinding slashes and deft parries. Each of them was attempting to *just* barely nick the other with the tip of a blade. It was a game that could swing either way if given so much as a hairsbreadth of leeway.

Suddenly, Wendell leapt straight up into the air and thrust. His arm blurred into full extension, tail fluttering through the air behind him as a counterbalance.

Lady Zirketh fell to her knees with a groan. She dropped her wooden swords and clutched her forehead in both hands.

Observant's voice was uncertain. "Touch? Apologies, I must summon an illusion for review."

The crowd murmured in confusion. It hadn't appeared like the two combatants were in striking range of one another at the time of the 'fatal' blow.

Immediately Lady Sanabella was out of her chair. She walked onto the field of battle... but not to tend to the wounded. She grabbed an ember from the nearby fire, kept stoked in case the weather turned foul and torches were needed. She lit an herbal stick of some sort. The sweet smoke drifted through the air as she approached Wendell.

The druid murmured, "Sorry, Sir Paladin. Could you extend your arms out to your sides?"

Mystified, Wendell did so. Sanabella passed the smudge stick over and around the wererat, chanting a prayer to Del-Nekbenth all the while. After a few moments, she sighed with relief.

She announced, loudly so that everyone would hear, "Sir Wendell is not enchanted, nor does he possess any enchanted items."

The druid patted the rat on the shoulder before moving to attend the groaning elf on the other side of the circle.

This just fueled the crowd's uncertainty and curiosity, at least until the yeti bard finished weaving his illusion. He announced, "I have a replication of the event. Please observe."

Ten feet above the battlefield, an enlarged version of Wendell and Madam Zirketh clashed. Time seemed to slow as the rat took flight. It was clear that his thrust would be at least a handspan short. But at this speed, the entire crowd saw the paladin **throw** his sword to gain the extra inches. The practice blade bounced off of his opponent's skull, rebounding right back into his waiting hand. The entire exchange took a fraction of a second.

This time, Observant's tone was confident. "Touch. Sir Wendell Hines is the winner."

The crowd was stunned. The bounty hunter just smirked up at the illusionary replay, shaking her head ruefully as she received a minor healing prayer for her troubles.

Wendell bowed to his fallen opponent, and she nodded back to the victor. He walked out of the ring in silence.

Only when he was half way back to his tent did he hear the audience break into a riotous cheer.

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His dreams were haunted by specters. He couldn't identify a single face, but he knew what they represented: A connection to Panos that he left behind long ago. A life that he could have led if only he'd learned to master his anger. A family that he could have had if only he learned to express his love. But it all felt so *close*. If he just reached out, maybe he could touch that world.

A faint rustle was all it took to wake the wererat. He sat up quickly in his bedroll, a very real longsword pointed towards the tent flap.

Jorry slid back until only his face and majestic beard could be seen through the tent flap. He said, "Don't kill me Dervish, I'm unarmed. Well. That's a lie, I have around five knives hidden on my person at all times. You wouldn't believe what I have to do to conceal number four..."

Wendell groaned. He dropped his sword, allowing it to fall onto his thin summer blanket with a muffled thud. He mumbled, "What'd ya want, Sir Reven?"

"Actually, I was going to ask you the same thing. For breakfast. What do you want for breakfast, Sir Hines?"

He rubbed the backs of his paws along the side of his muzzle, scratching an itch and clearing the sand from his eyes. Why was the Master of Ceremonies inviting him to breakfast? Trouble? Intrigue? He asked, "Do you moonlight as a serving wench?"

The big man said, "Well, yes. But that's just for entertainment. My wife likes to do some role reversal, you see. She's a pirate lord, and I'm her waif of a cabin boy. She makes me dress up in shameful silk pantaloons, and-

Wendell had the presence of mind to cut the other man off before he learned too much, "Jorry. Is there some kind of trouble?"

The bald man shook his head briskly. "No, no. I just thought you might like to share breakfast."

It took a few extra moments to register in the socially inept rat's mind: Friendship. He was being friendly. This is what normal people did. He recalled some of his more recent lessons in manners and social grace. If the other man was just being polite, he should decline. But if it was a genuine offer, he should say...

"Yes."

Jorry broke into a big smile. "Ah. Good. I've got the fire going."

Wendell glanced down. He said, "I'll be a few minutes, I need to get dressed."

"You don't have any silk pantaloons, by chance..."

"Get out."

The human chuckled as he retreated.

Minutes later, Wendell was out in the East field. Little breakfast fires dotted the flat landscape. Ex-competitors and diehard fans made up the majority of campers on the final day of the contest.

Before their morning tea water was even boiled, the human and the wererat encountered a pair of those fans. Two little urchins scampered up to their fire, practice swords at the ready. Wendell wasn't surprised. Jorry was somewhat of a legend around these parts, and the kids loved him.

What did surprise him was when the lads made a detour. Two miniature swords were thrust in front of his face.

The slightly taller one said, "Please there mister, would'ya make yer mark?"

The smaller lad hopped up and down. "Yes, yes mister, and then me too please?"

Wordlessly, Sir Reven held a little knife out to the wererat. He seemed to produce it from nowhere at all.



Slightly stunned by this turn of events, Wendell carefully carved his mark into the hilts of the small practice swords. The boys vibrated in place as he finished, so excited it seemed like they might pop at any moment.

The bigger lad said, "Thanks, Sir Rat." Then he charged off, waving his little sword in the air.

The smaller one started to run after him, but impulsively turned back and hugged Wendell first. "Thanks!" he piped, and then followed his companion towards their next adventure.

Jorry took his knife back. He chuckled, "First fans?"

"Yeah."

The big human dumped some tea into their little pot. He predicted, "Won't be your last."

They shared black tea, trail bread, and boiled eggs. The pair talked about the weather, and what they would be doing later in the season. Nothing of consequence was discussed, which suited them both just fine.

As the sun started to rise over the eastern treeline, Wendell said, "I think I found my answer."

Jorry poured the dregs of the tea into his mug. "Hmmm?"

"When I don't know what in the hells I'm doing, I ask myself, '*What would Toby do?*' I've been asking that a lot this week."

"Oh, aye. And what's the answer?"

Wendell pointed a claw towards the kids, who were still running around nearby campsites and showing off their newly marked blades. "He would do this. Exactly this. And he'd do it for them."

Sir Reven gave him a half smile. He asked, "Do you think he'd win the whole thing?"

"I think he'd damn well try."

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"For your first semi-final match of the day. Saramis versus Sir Wendell Hines!"

A hush fell over the crowd. The lizardman that approached from the far end of the dueling field was legendary. Saramis was known as The Marble Killer. Not just because of the beautiful blend of deep green and light teal that graced his scales. And not just because of his pedigree as a soldier. But also for his stoney silence and toughness. He wore only a pair of shorts, leaving the rest of his well sculpted body on display as a form of intimidation.

Wendell tried to shake the nerves out of his system. He rolled his shoulders, he flexed his fuzzy legs. When they went to collect their weapons, he tried not to focus on the fact that his opponent's tower shield was taller than the wererat himself. At least both of them were wielding longswords with about the same reach.

Sanabella examined the ring as the fighters took their places. Satisfied that nothing was amiss, her hand sliced through the air. "Begin."

Nobody moved.

Wendell half expected his opponent to charge across the field of battle, massive shield leading. Apparently the lizardman predicted an all out attack from his fast, agile foe. Both were demonstrably wrong. Eventually the combatants closed the distance; engaging in a mutual, cautious creep towards the center of the ring.

Saramis repelled his opponent's offense with shocking ease. His tower shield essentially cut off half of the paladin's attack routes. On his other side, deft swordsmanship and easy power held up, even under the most deceptive of attacks from his small foe. And after every exchange, the lizardman scooted forward, cutting off more of the ring.

Wendell found himself starving for room to maneuver. He had to expend energy to get out of tight spots, sprinting or rolling into more open areas of the ring. But, as inevitable as the tide, The Marble Killer walked him down and pressured him. Twice, a snap of the lizardman's tail nearly took his head off. He almost skidded over the rope boundary when a teep kick found his buckler and sent the rat tumbling head over heels. After a few minutes of this kind of oppressive pressure, he felt drained, tired... trapped.

It was time to gamble.

He feigned a tiny stumble, trying to bait a thrust. Instead, a third tail swipe cut through the air. The wererat modified his plan on the fly. He spun *towards* the incoming blow. Tailtip was met with a bruising shield block. Saramis ignored the pain, lunging to launch an efficient, brutal thrust at his small foe.

But Wendell arrested his torque with dug-in claws and sheer will. His momentum reversed as he executed a backspin parry. As the two combatants moved past each other, the wererat angled his arm up and out in a completely blind side thrust.

The tip of his wooden sword barely brushed against the scales of his opponent's thigh. And yet the lizardman screamed as if he'd been completely impaled by a pike. Some pain transcended the physical.

A yeti's calm rumble announced, "Touch. Sir Wendell Hines wins."

Saramis was half way out of the ring before Observant finished his sentence. The audience roared. A chant, led by a few incorrigible young lads waving little practice swords, swept through the crowd. Soon it was amplified by the adults and elders in attendance:

**“Dervish! Dervish!”**

Once Wendell caught his breath, he had the good grace to bow towards the judge’s booth. Then he turned towards the cheering crowd. His tail writhed like an overjoyed snake as he saluted his new fans with a deft en garde.

Then he turned to leave the ring, ears shied back to muffle the deafening cheers. He nearly didn’t make it back to his tent, blinded as he was by the happy tears that he was so desperately trying to hide.

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Wendell’s mind floated in the ether. This kind of inner peace was a rarity, to say the least. Most of his meditations were turbulent attempts to contain his inner rage. But this time, he was one with nothing.

A rustling caused his left ear to twitch. He murmured, “Which one is it?”

Sir Reven said, “The minotaur.”

The wererat nodded, ever so slowly.

The bigger man said, “Not gonna be easy, this one. He’s not a mean lad, but he hits like a runaway caravan.”

“Mmmm hmmm.”

Sir Reven scowled at the paladin’s non-committal reply. He barked, “So yer just gonna roll over and die?”

“Mmmm-mmm.”

The ex-pirate threw his hands in the air, touching the fabric that made up the roof of the little tent. “Well then you have to get worked up! You want to win, don’t you?”

Wendell’s eyes opened, just a fraction. He smiled at his new friend. “This is an experience I’ll never forget. Either way, I’ve already won.”

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“Contesting the Finals: Sir Abner MacDougal versus Sir Wendell Hines.”

The good natured handshake was almost comical. Sir Abner's massive, fuzzy hand covered Wendell's wrist and part of his forearm.

In one respect, the paladin had been right. In the crowd's eyes, there would be no loser. The massive minotaur, a towering brown furred warrior from Tater Town, was beloved all over northern Panos. His knighthood was granted due to his humanitarian efforts among the homeless populations of several cities. He was an accomplished stage actor in addition to being a fierce swordsman. So if he beat the rising star of a rat, nobody would weep too much. Not even Wendell.

The paladin felt strangely calm as he reached for his sword and shield. He couldn't ignore the fact that his opponent's two handed sword was incredibly long; easily his height and half again. But he wasn't intimidated. If anything he felt inspired. Excited. Alive.

They took their places inside the rope ring, awaiting the druid's signal.

"Begin!"

**Whoosh!**

The wooden claymore's blunt tip came within a handspan of his muzzle. His opponent's reach was massive, encompassing a significant portion of the fighting area at any given time. And Sir Abner was anything but slow. He controlled the momentum of his swing and pulled back into guard position before the wererat could have possibly closed the distance.

This was going to be a problem.

Wendell stayed light on his toes, dancing just inside the outer third of the rope circle. He spun his sword and cocked his arm back, as if contemplating throwing his blade. The minotaur was having none of it. A horizontal swipe at neck level forced the wererat to dive and roll, tucking his tail behind one of his thighs lest it get caught by the ferocious blow. He recovered his feet quickly and tried to charge into range before his opponent could kill the momentum of his swing.

Too slow.

He sucked in his breath when he saw the thrust coming. All he could do was skid to a halt and raise his buckler. The sheer force of the strike **slammed** the edge of his little shield into his chin. Then he was airborne.

Dazed from the indirect strike to the jaw, time seemed to slow down around Wendell. A blackness crept in around the edges of his vision. But inside of that dark haze was a familiar face.

Toby.

Suddenly, they were sitting on the porch of The Order of the Snow's practice yard back in Ice House. Master and student watched two of the Order's most advanced duelists clash.

Toby leaned over and whispered, "Where's the fastest blade?"

Wendell tried to analyse the combatants. He watched their hand speed, their eyes, their tactical adjustments. Still, he couldn't tell which of them was fastest.

"I don't know, Master."

Then he felt a giant finger turning his chin.

Toby looked him in the eye and shook his horned head. He reached over with his free hand and tapped his student right between the eyes.

"It's up here, Wendell. The fastest blade is in the mind."

Reality rushed in as quickly as the ground. The wererat tumbled. Then he dug his claws into the grass, barely managing to avoid skidding out of the circle. His shield arm felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. His back felt like one big bruise. And his jaw didn't feel like it fit quite right on the front of his face.

But he was smiling.

He charged in once more. It was as if he'd learned nothing from his first attempt, and needed another lesson.

Sir Abner obliged. This time, the thrust was aimed dead center, right at the paladin's breastbone. Even a second miraculous block from his opponent would send the small creature tumbling out of the ring.

Wendell leapt. Just like last time, the minotaur's claymore was held horizontal. He felt his small foot find purchase and churned his legs. Before it really registered in his opponent's mind, the small paladin sprinted up the flat of the blade.

He dragged his longsword over Sir Abner's shoulder, then tumbled gracelessly over the bull's back, landing in a heap.

Observant shouted, "Touch! Rules review?"

The minotaur let out a hearty laugh. He was shaking his great head, as if he already knew the answer.

From flat on his back, a breathless Wendell sputtered, "Pinning... pinning with..."

Sparing him the effort, Sir Reven quoted the rule in question, "Attempting to pin the flat of a blade to the ground with one's foot is perfectly legal."

Sanabella started laughing. Several people in the crowd joined her, even as the applause started.

Before he could be completely drowned out, Observant announced, "Sir Wendell Hines wins!"

A massive brown furred hand reached down to help the wererat back to his feet. The minotaur rumbled, "How many of you do you think it would take to pin my blade to the ground, little paladin?"

Wendell, still shaking from the effort, held onto Sir Abner's wrist for support. He guessed, "Three or four?"

The big bull snorted and patted him on the back. "Half a dozen. At least."

Once again, Wendell felt himself being lifted into the air. This time, he was ready.

He held his wooden longsword aloft, looked out into the cheering crowd, and unleashed a fierce little chitter. It was the victory cry of a most unlikely champion.