



HEROES COME IN ALL SIZES

Hal Greenberg and Kevin Glusing

PUBLISHED BY

Samurai Sheepdog, LLC
Samurai Sheepdog, Publisher
6819 Guilford Bridge Dr
Apollo Beach, FL 33572
www.samuraisheepdog.com

Copyright ©2016 Samurai Sheepdog.

Story Copyrights ©2016 by the individual authors.

The Awakened Setting ©2016 Hal Greenberg.

The Awakened Logo TM 2016 Hal Greenberg.

The Awakened Logo created by Laine Garrett,
modified by Jhoneil Centeno.

ISBN (trade paper): 978-1-937051-81-5

All rights reserved. No part of the contents of this
book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means without the written permission of the
publisher.

All persons, places, and events in this book are
fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,
places, or events is purely coincidental.

Lion Icon/Tribal Predators © Digital-Clipart - Fotolia.
com

Editors: Hal Greenberg, Warren Bailey, Neal Levin

Interior art: Tony Szczudlo, Ruth Ducko

Cover Art: Tony Szczudlo

Cartography: Tom Fayen

Interior Design: Kevin Glusing



HEROES COME IN ALL SIZES

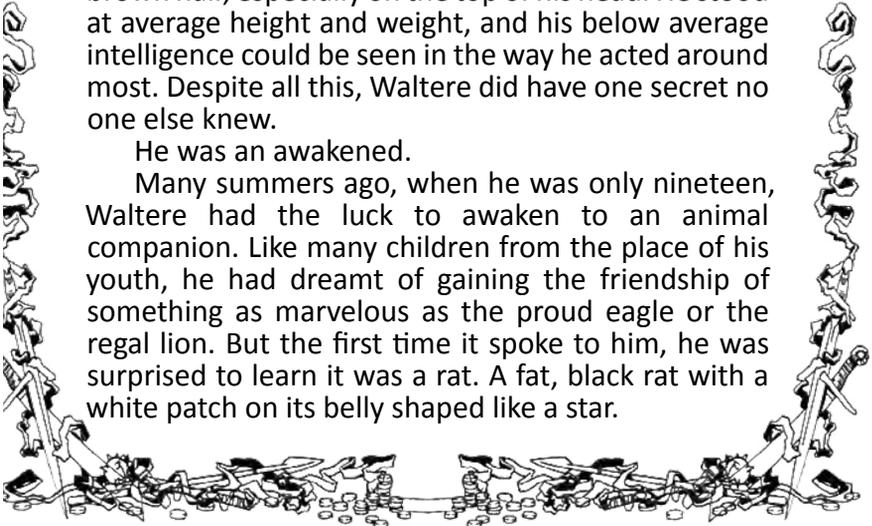
Hal Greenberg & Kevin Glusing

When he awoke to moonlight spilling over his face from a barred window near the ceiling of the cell, Waltere looked despondently at the hay strewn around and muttered, "Again."

He was a thief, but not a good one, Waltere knew. He was an unremarkable man of forty-five summers with plain, brown eyes and already thinning, light brown hair, especially on the top of his head. He stood at average height and weight, and his below average intelligence could be seen in the way he acted around most. Despite all this, Waltere did have one secret no one else knew.

He was an awakened.

Many summers ago, when he was only nineteen, Waltere had the luck to awaken to an animal companion. Like many children from the place of his youth, he had dreamt of gaining the friendship of something as marvelous as the proud eagle or the regal lion. But the first time it spoke to him, he was surprised to learn it was a rat. A fat, black rat with a white patch on its belly shaped like a star.



Most awakened would take this as a sign and probably name the creature something like Star, Patches, or some other fanciful name. Indeed, according to the rat, its real name was Granzig Von Dupenstein III. Waltere could never remember such a complicated name, however, so he simply called his rat, "Rat."

As if summoned by the thought of him, Rat scampered out of a small hole in the cell's outer wall and shared in Waltere's disdain for the filthy straw that covered the floor. Carefully stepping around several soiled pieces, the tiny creature made its way up Waltere's pants leg to perch on his shoulder.

The least they could do is sweep this place occasionally. I'm on the verge of sneezing from all the dust, and I don't even have allergies.

They had tried for years to teach Waltere to mindspeak, but even though Rat frequently shared his thoughts through a mix of feelings and actual mental communication, the man never understood the concept of speaking to his companion only in his mind so he would simply whisper to him.

"Rat... Rat, it is time. Go to the jail guard and get the key from him. Let's get out of here."

Waltere had been arrested again for stealing; always food. A minor offense, but he got caught a lot. More often than not, it would mean Rat getting him out and the two of them leaving to a different village where the cycle repeated itself soon enough. He was in the king's lands, after all, where the guards were paid well enough to care if they found somebody like him. He liked to steal here because the king recruited awakened and Waltere felt if he ever got in real trouble he would just admit his power and be released. Not that he wanted to work with or for the king, having heard some nasty stories in his day, but Waltere always made sure to remember his backup plan.

After a brief pause to clean his feet, Rat crawled back down Waltere's clothes. Without hesitation, he quickly went up to the guard, sniffed around, poked him a bit and waited. When nothing happened, he proceeded to gnaw through the leather clip that held the keys to the cells. When it was broken, Rat jumped back down and dragged them over to Waltere's door.

Watching the spectacle quietly from his cage, Waltere was reminded how frustrated he used to get that Rat was so much smarter than he. After twenty-six years together, however, he had grown used to that fact. Plus, his companion was always careful not to rub it in.

As Rat returned to his place on the thief's shoulder, he began to clean himself again. *Pardon any tracks, I'm certain I stepped in something.*

"Thank you good friend, we will be out of here in no time." Waltere bent over and grabbed the keys and left the cell as easy as it was to put him in. Had the guard woken up, Rat would hide again until another opportunity presented itself and Waltere would try to pass off that the man had left the door unlocked, all while returning to the inside. He was not a warrior by any means and never put up a fight if he could help it.

With the door once again shut and locked, Waltere carefully set the keys on the desk next to the guard while grabbing the man's apple to split with Rat later. With a smile, the pair left this jail as they had dozens of others before; simply walking out of town in the middle of the night with Rat clean and nestled safely in his shirt pocket.

When they were clear of the village, Waltere and Rat rested a while longer before traveling a bit southwest, making a point to visit the towns on that path, but never getting too close to the castle. As sure as Waltere was that he would be given leeway due to being an awakened he did not want to press his perpetual bad luck.

It's going to be one or two day walk to the nearest settlement, Rat commented at one point to break the silence between them.

"We have food for it," the human replied, "and a blanket, like you taught me." Rat had shown the older man how to hide a few days' rations and a blanket where they could retrieve them in a hurry if the need arose, and since it usually did, Waltere had become quite good at it.

A while later, they sat down to lunch, then kept moving. Right around sundown, as the moons were rising, a noise ahead of them made Waltere pause.

“Did you hear it too, Rat?”

Sounds to me like there’s a scuffle ahead.

Cautiously, they moved forward. Waltere tried not to make any noise while Rat mind spoke their chant over and over again to keep his attention on doing so.

Be careful, be quiet. Be careful, be quiet.

Ahead of them, Waltere saw a grizzled, older man with fiery red hair and a ball of flame in his left hand. He couldn’t hear what the man was muttering, but Rat’s keen ears allowed the beast to relay it to him.

“Tie yourselves up like good youngin’s and you won’t get singed, for I have the power of the sun inside me.” He cackled a bit, spit, and repeated, “Get on with it; quickly, now.”

In front of the fire man, as Waltere had dubbed him, two young boys struggled to get a rope around their waists and necks without choking themselves. One looked barely old enough to be awakened. The other was noticeably younger. Their shared features marked the boys as siblings; each having short, blond hair, blue eyes, and an identical nose to the other.

I know it breaks your heart to see this, Rat consoled Waltere as feelings of regret passed between them. Honestly, though, what could we do about it? That man would turn me into a char on the ground.

Waltere had never liked seeing children being hurt or abused, and while his cowardice usually made him let it go when he saw it on the streets, something about this particular situation rubbed him the wrong way. Enough was enough.

Squinting through the light of the fire man’s palm, the thief could just make out the rope with which the boys tied themselves. It was old and frayed.

“Rat, you could easily gnaw through that.”

I suppose...

His companion’s doubt over interpreting what he could see was apparent, but Waltere pressed on anyway.

“Once the fire man is asleep, you do what you do best and chew through the ropes. Free those boys.”

Rat’s confusion was apparent even before he mindspoke, *Wait. You want me to help others?*

“Yes, I don’t like when men take advantage of their size and strength on children. Is that a problem?”

No I've just never helped you help anyone but yourself. Just a little shocked.

Waltere gave Rat a frown that the rodent would see better than he could, then quickly composed himself and hunkered down off the side of the road until everything had calmed down and the fire man looked asleep. Before lying down, the kidnapper had tied together the boys' feet so they were forced to sit uncomfortably to prevent rope burn.

"Okay, Rat. It's time to go help those boys. Be careful."

Without protest, Rat crawled his way over to the boys and started tearing at the rope with tooth and claw. As soon as the coils around their feet fell loose, Rat squeaked just loud enough to get the children's attention without also waking up their captor. Looking around in surprise, they noticed finally him, and he jumped a few times before running off in Waltere's direction. More curious than cautious, and still tied to each other, the boys quietly followed Rat over to Waltere, who quietly welcomed them and untied the remainder of their bonds.

"Thanks mister," the younger of the two boys stated with a shaky smile. Waltere not used to spending time with people just smiled a crooked smile and mumbled to all three.

"We need to go before the old man wakes up, where do you live?" Waltere asked.

Still faltering a bit, the child replied, "We live nowhere now. That man destroyed our village and took my brother and me."

"My name is Quinn and this is Albot." The older of the two boys spoke up finally.

"Say hi later," Waltere pleaded, "when we get away from here." As Rat had pointed out, they had no good defense against the fire man.

Quinn and Albot nodded, and the four of them hurried past their sleeping adversary to continue on the original path Waltere was already taking to the next village. As they walked, he withdrew some of his bread and cheese, only to find the boys staring hungrily.

Sheepishly, he looked between them for a moment before asking, "Did you want some?"

"Please?" Albot practically begged. "We haven't eaten since this morning."

Waltere made to stop so he could divide the food up evenly, but Rat prodded him mentally.

Eat while we keep moving. I doubt the fire man was a tracker, so he probably won't think we continued south-west toward the castle, but let's not press our luck.

"Good idea," Waltere replied to curious looks from Quinn and his brother. They had put some more distance between them and the angry man before he realized that they didn't hear Rat's suggestion, and only then because Albot asked about them.

"How did you teach that rat to be so smart?"

Thinking hard how best to explain it, Waltere finally replied, "I did not teach him anything, I am awakened and Rat is my companion. He is very smart and I ask him to do things and he usually does."

As Waltere said this, Rat jumped out of his pocket and stood on his shoulder to stare at the younger of the two boys, whose eyes darted between Waltere and his brother. *That should suffice for now. If you don't mind, I could use a little more food. I'm still trying to get the taste of that rope out of my mouth.*

Waltere shared his friend's thought as he dug out more food for them both. Learning the rodent's plight, Albot apologized to Rat and all seemed sorted out. They eventually found a safe place to camp for the night.

"No fire," Waltere warned after talking it over with Rat. "We don't want to be found in case the flame man got lucky and picked the same direction to follow us. If you're cold, use the blanket."

Taking the blanket, Quinn smiled, "Thank you again for saving us."

The fear of getting caught subsided a little and Waltere smiled back, "Sleep. We need to get to town before we're found or we run out of food." When the boys were resting, he wrapped his own clothes tightly around him as Rat snuggled in deep in his pocket. Sleep eventually brought with it a dream of Rat being more comfortable than he, and Waltere felt a little slighted, but was otherwise silent on the subject.

The next morning held a chill in the air but with no fire they ate in silence; a little more cheese, bread and water. Before he could tear off larger portions, Rat's mindspeak made Waltere pause.

With the kids in tow, what was a two day adventure will surely become three now, so we need to ration out the food.

Waltere shared this thought with Quinn and Albot, who readily agreed. When everybody had their share, they got up and started back on the trek to the next village. Traveling all day on so little to eat was more tiring than expected, unfortunately, so they stopped early, deciding it was finally safe to start a fire.

Just before dawn, Waltere woke to find the still-warm embers of the fire dying out. The four of them were safe, for now. This comforted the thief, allowing him to drift back to sleep until the children awoke. When they did, he felt much more refreshed due to the heat the fire gave them throughout the night. With everybody in a much better mood, they all left at a brisker pace to the next village.

At dusk, they could see the village ahead. Pulling the kids aside, Waltere explained, "We should make camp here just one more night since we have no coin for rooms."

Offering no better suggestions, the boys agreed. Once again, the fire was lit and it was another peaceful and quiet night. All four woke up with a big appetite.

We're close enough now, Rat mindspoke cheerily. With the village in sight, eating the rest of the food is fine since we can find more once inside.

The town looked like every other village Waltere and Rat had passed through. As he and the boys reached its center, they found a few carts selling wares as well as food.

"You two go see if anybody's giving away old food from yesterday," Waltere suggested at Rat's behest. When they left, he ducked around a corner and spoke to Rat for a few brief moments. "You know what to do, Rat. Go find food."

Sharing a nod between them, his companion disappeared under the nearest stall. A little while later, the rodent came

back to drop off a loaf of bread before leaving again. Staying out of sight, Waltere quickly hid the loaf to avoid suspicion. When Rat returned again, it was with a small wheel of cheese. Waltere cheered his little friend and stuffed a piece of the cheese in his pocket so Rat could eat it at his leisure when they were done.

Soon after, the boys returned, a little put-off at their own inability to obtain food. Dark were clouds rolling in overhead now, signaling an oncoming storm, so the four of them looked for a structure under which they could stay dry.

When asked why they had to find shelter, Quinn explained to his brother, "Depending on how far south one travels, these rains are known to turn into snow very quickly."

Thankfully, Waltere had neither the clothes nor the stamina to go that far south so a heavy downpour would be the worst of it. As the rain began to fall, he and the children ducked into a rundown barn where, much to Rat's chagrin, they found some old hay on which to relax until the storm passed.

With nothing else to do but wait out the weather, Waltere finally asked, "Where are the two of you from, anyway? Why was the fire man after you?"

Exchanging looks with Albot, Quinn finally spoke up, "We don't know why he was taking us, but we're from a small town on the northern border of Stewardsland. He killed our parents, but snagged both me and Albot, saying he didn't know what else to do with him for now."

Albot nodded and added, "The old man also said he was heading to a few more villages and then was going back to the castle."

Taking them at their word, Waltere gave the kids a look as if he were going to question them some more, but changed his mind. He couldn't think why the fire man would take them to the castle. They did not appear to be royalty or speak as he would believe some of royal birth would speak.

It was nearing sunset when the rain let up, and everybody was hungry again.

It will be easy enough to sneak out and get something with so few around to see us, Rat suggested. Waltere relayed the

message to the boys who happily agreed and the four of them left the safety of the barn on their way back to the carts.

"You there," somebody called suddenly, and Waltere instinctively looked around for an escape route. He didn't want to deal with anybody right now, least of all a law man. Running up to them, however, was not a law man, but one of the vendors from the carts. His panicked expression spoke volumes.

Look at his arm, Rat pointed out. The sleeve of his shirt is singed.

Waltere had no time to reply as the seller reached them and addressed the boys immediately, "You're the two I saw earlier, right? Of course you are. There is a man back at the carts, trying to find you. He's threatening to set the whole village on fire if we don't return you to him by nightfall."

"That's very bad," Waltere lamented. "But he can't take the boys, and there's nothing we can do to stop him."

Growing angry, the distressed vendor reached for Albot, but Waltere cut him off. "You leave them alone."

"Get out of my way, fool. He's going to kill many more children if we don't give him these two. I have to protect my family, too."

The man took a swing at him, and Waltere fell on his backside to avoid the attack. Scrambling back up, he again put himself between the other man and the kids. Reaching into his pocket, he grabbed Rat and stuffed him into the oldest one's hands.

"Quinn, Albot. Take Rat and get away from here. I'm going to deal with the fire man."

You can't, Rat practically cried, making Waltere's ears ring, but he set his jaw.

"I mean it, Rat. Keep them safe. You," he pointed at the man whose face was now a mask of terror as he realized Waltere was also awakened. "Show me to the fire man so we can talk."

The vendor's mouth moved, but no words came out, so he sufficed to nod. As Quinn, Albot, and Rat disappeared toward the edge of town, Waltere followed the man back toward the carts. After a few moments, Rat's vain swearing at him left his mind. For the first time in twenty-six years, he was truly alone.

The fire man was cackling to himself and eating some cooked meat on a skewer when Waltere approached him. Looking him over, the man spat out a piece of his food, "Who the hell is this sod? I was very clear. I want the boys. Now!"

With a flourish, the man set ablaze one of the carts from which those around it scattered.

Waltere held his hands above his head, remembering what the law men always told him to do when they wanted him to come peacefully, "I mean you no harm, fire man. I came to give you me instead of the boys because I am awakened and worth more than either of them to the king if that's where you're going."

The man turned away from the already smoldering cart to leer at him, "Really? And just what are you supposed to be able to do?"

"Well," Waltere said nervously, "I have a companion, Rat. He's my friend and he listens to me and steals things for me. Rat is really good at getting into places to take things."

The boys' erstwhile captor didn't look pleased by this news, "And I suppose this, 'Rat,' is in your pocket now? Care to demonstrate?"

"Well," the thief realized too late, "he's not actually with me now. See, I sent him with the children to keep them safe while I gave myself over to you."

There was silence long enough that Waltere began to shuffle back and forth on his feet while the man just stared at him, his expression unrecognizable. Finally, he approached Waltere and pointed the skewer he had been chewing from.

"You...," he sighed while tapping Waltere on the chest with the skewer's sharp end, "have got to be the stupidest excuse for a human being I have ever had the displeasure of meeting."

Waltere began to speak but his words were cut short as the skewer slid between his ribs and pierced his heart, taking his breath away in one fell swoop.

Smiling again, the fire man continued, "You aren't even worth the time it would take me to set you on fire, so here. Bleed out on the ground and watch while I show everybody else why letting you waste my time wasn't a good idea."

The thief fell to the ground on his side, unable to catch his breath as his pulse raised and pushed still more blood out through the wound in his chest.

“This,” the fire man yelled to everybody else as a spark flew from his finger tip to catch a curtain of rugs hanging from a line on fire, “is what happens when you disobey. And this...”

Waltere’s vision blurred and darkness crept in at the corners, making him cry. He had always been afraid this would happen eventually. He never really liked the dark, and now it would be the last thing he knew...

Not yet, my friend.

The man’s eyes snapped open, stealing the last energy he could muster to look up as the ground itself around the fire man began to churn and swell; not from fire or rain, but from dozens of little, furry bodies that came from everywhere at once. The sudden appearance of so many rats left the fire man with nothing to say and he looked back at Waltere, dumbfounded as they washed over him.

Without the ability to speak, something finally clicked in Waltere’s head and he looked over to where Rat was helping the other animals claw and bite at the man.

Be careful, I don’t want him hurting you too.

A sense of pride washed over him, even as he gasped again. Everything was almost gone now.

He can’t start a fire if he can’t concentrate.

Through the fog, Waltere could hear the fire man’s screams become gurgles and finally go quiet. Then everything else went quiet as well as the world fled from his grasp. For a moment, he was utterly alone, then a tiny voice spoke to him from nowhere.

Hey, you were able to mindspeak, Rat congratulated him. I’m so proud of you.

Waltere smiled to himself as he slipped away, *I suppose I did. Goodbye my friend.*

Something moved in the darkness. Then something else. Suddenly, a prick of light shone through. It was warm and very inviting. Waltere reached for it only to have it escape his grasp.

“I think he’s coming to,” a distant voice spoke excitedly.

“You did it, Quinn. You did it.”

Quinn?

Rat’s voice boomed in his head as Waltere’s eyes fluttered open and he found himself staring at the two boys he tried to protect, *You’re alive. By the two moons, you’re alive!*

A ball of black fur with a distinctive star shape on its belly was suddenly hugging onto his face, nuzzling him with its whiskered nose and staring into his eyes with its own tiny black orbs.

I guess I am...

He reminded himself to talk normal again, “I mean, I guess I am alive. What happened?”

The vendor from before helped him to sit up, “Your distraction saved us all, and this boy...”

He slapped Quinn on the back, “... saved you in turn. Nobody else was hurt, all thanks to you.”

The fog was still fading from his vision, and Waltere looked down to find himself covered in his own blood, but there was no stab wound to be found.

“But how?”

Quinn looked around nervously at the gathering crowd as murmurs began to trickle through it about the boy who could bring the dead back to life and the brave man with his rat.

“I, um, well that’s why the fire man wanted me. I have healing powers. I’m not great with them yet, so I couldn’t save my parents, but yours was only a single stab.”

He cleared his throat and wiped away a tear at the mention of his parents, “I told him I would come peacefully if he brought my brother also. He figured there was a good chance my brother would awaken in time as well, so he agreed. That’s when you must have found us.”

Waltere hugged the young man tight, pulling Albot in as well. Between the three of them, Rat squeaked and slid out from where he was being crushed.

All’s well and good, Waltere’s companion said with a dark tone. But now that this has happened, there’s no chance the king will leave these people alone. And from the sound of all the chattering already, they’re not going to stay quiet about it.

The thief let go his new friends and addressed his lifelong one, "Then I guess that means we'll have to stay here and help them deal with it if it happens."

A feeling of mixed relief and worry flowed from Rat to him, but he matched it with his own newfound confidence and they nodded to each other. Looking back up at Quinn, Waltere tried once to stand before the loss of blood made him sit back down hard.

"You and your brother won't be safe here."

Quinn shook his head, "I know, but we have to do something. Now that we've made this place dangerous for the town..."

"Let Rat and me help them. You two continue east," Waltere expressed, finally getting his feet. Rat was helping him get the words out that his mind would otherwise falter with. "Rat and I always hear stories of people in the east who try to help. We never went because I was scared, but now you can go and help them too."

The boys nodded, and Quinn took Waltere's hand, shaking it. "Thank you for everything."

"Thank you for not letting the darkness take me," Waltere said in return. "Now ask these nice people for a comfortable place to sleep tonight. In the morning, get some supplies and get out of here."

But the boys weren't the only ones welcomed to sleep comfortably that night. When word spread of the unlikely heroes protecting them all from a kingsman, Waltere and Rat were shown not to a cell, but to the inn, where they would be allowed to stay for however long they wanted.

The End

