

Chronicles of Ballidrous

Campaign Setting



The Wall of Stone & Iron

Official Short Fiction

by James S. Austin

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Valdemar stood before the towering wall of stone. The crisp air swirled around him, the smell of the sea and rock carried on its persistent breath. His fluttering stomach had calmed after arriving to this morning's angst-laden rendezvous, now that he looked onto his immediate task... a chance to prove his mettle... a chance to prove to his father he is not lost to the family legacy.

He looked over to Metsu'zech, the Madraderian's deep brown skin shown taut on his heavy frame. The man stood as if also made of solid rock, with his thick, corded arms crossed in front and boots steady and sure to the ground. The man's broad-bladed sword strapped to his back twinkled in the sun's dawn light at its top, capturing the early rays. Metsu'zech had greeted Valdemar and the other two potential initiates to the Circle of Iron of Hestra Cairn at sunrise, here at the base of The Iron Steps.

"Begin," Metsu'zech's voice resonated, telling Valdemar his turn to climb had come.

With a quick huff, Valdemar stepped up and reached out to the wall. This was just the first task to prove one is worthy for the swordmaster school. It was almost ridiculous to think this once proud and thriving institution fell during the elven invasion, leaving much of training structures in ruins. The scene awakened all the stories he heard over his fifteen summers of life, even if his father refused to acknowledge ties to the institution. The proud lineage was disrupted, almost nearly lost, in the bloody conflict.

Looking skyward, the above ledge made for an imposing ascent. The climb was well over 60-foot, a jagged wall with intermittent handholds and iron pegs. And in the process, collect six flags from spaced-out rings along the way up. Valdemar wondered why they would make this so difficult if they desperately needed new recruits.

Valdemar's hands touched on the cool, gritty surface, looking to his first ring and the green scarf hanging among the other dyed scarfs. Hand, foot, hand, foot.

He focused on his movements, picking his path carefully, imagining each critical position to support his weight. At the tug of the first scarf, he paused to

gather himself and decide on his path to the second ring.

Valdemar could hear his father now, *pick yourself up. You're wasting time. Time is coin and the wrong decision at sea could send you to its depths.* The man was an insufferable taskmaster.

The family name, Kerrin, held sway in the Navigator's Guild of Castiel thanks to his father's ambitions. Valdemar found his studies in navigation dull and tedious, often dosing during lessons. It was his grandfather's footsteps Valdemar wished to follow, as a swordmaster. His father refused to talk of the past and his grandfather, saying the man was unable to carry the family name on the edge of a blade. *It should be on the edge of a coin,* as his father lectured.

Hand, foot, hand, foot.

Valdemar smiled as the Fates seemed to favor him this day. During his off time, Valdemar would join his few friends to walk and climb the White Mountains, north of the city. They rarely used rope or other climbing tools, so this offered little in difficulty.

Second and third ring done.

Hand, foot, hand, foot.

It was only by sheer coincidence that Valdemar's father was approached by Ivorn, the Headmaster of the Iron Circle, at a guild council meeting. He shared sour words of Valdemar's lack of interest in their brief conversation. He had made a jest of sending his second son to be disciplined with 'iron'. After further discussion, he found Ivorn to be a clever and influential man among the nobles of Castiel, and his father's ambition to expand his connections to the older families had them depart with a handshake and an agreement.

Fourth and fifth ring.

Hand, foot, hand, foot.

Valdemar looked down just as the second prospective initiate stretched for the third ring, making the mistake of reaching out too far, to slip free of his grip. He recalled the eager enthusiasm the boy displayed.

Unforgiving. The fall was quick, and he lay prone at the foot of the wall. Metsu'zech moved towards the felled young man and knelt before Valdemar resumed.

Shifting sideways, using one of the iron pitons to secure himself after an awkward move to a lower, slender ledge, he halted for a quick rest. With the sixth scarf close, his gaze crawled up to the ledge above. The end was near. Then downward.

Then he looked below. The boy was propped up, holding his arm. The third initiate, a slim Cassian female with pointed features and a crooked smile, swiftly made her way up the wall. Her graceful movements demonstrated a talent beyond his own. Impressive.

As his breath slowed and the growing aches ebbed to a dull throb, Valdemar made for his final push.

Hand, foot, hand, foot.

The sixth ring and then to the top. With an unceremonious swing of the leg, up and over to lie on his back, the white-spotted sky greeted him. The end.

What Valdemar felt next surprised him more than his father consenting to this trial. Having climbed for years reaching the tops of snowy peaks and soaring crags, there was something different with this. Although not as difficult, a sense of accomplishment washed over him... a feeling that this was the one climb he had been waiting for.

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