

Count, a bat-mage, attends the Academy. When the headmaster recruits him, he must decide between becoming the Academy's hero in a broken society or becoming the people's hero, risking the life of the man he loves.

Countenance of a Hero

By B. M. Valdez

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of a Hero

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Relapse

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Chapter One

If Count didn't know any better, he would've thought everyone had turned to statues.

"You're late," the trainer, Surely Ram, said. "Again."

"I'm so sorr—" Count was silenced when the trainer narrowed his gaze.

Surely paced forward, and the half-circle of young adults sitting in front of him ducked their heads. None dared turn around to see Count. "It is my opinion that you don't *care*," he said, voice soft.

Count took a step backwards, shaking his head to disagree.

Surely's knuckles turned white where his hands gripped his elbows. "You don't care about your future. You don't care about your peers. You don't care about my time and effort. And you certainly don't care about protecting those that are weaker than us," Surely said.

Count had a few responses for Surely's accusations.

You don't care about my future, so why should I?

Why even pretend to hold my peers back for me?

This is your job. Your time and effort don't belong elsewhere.

How can I hope to protect the humans when I can't even protect myself?

Instead of saying any of them, he used the same lame excuse he told Surely every day. "It's hard to sleep at night; I'm too restless." He pushed his sunglasses up the bridge of his nose. "And the sun hurts my eyes."

Surely leaned his weight backwards as his green and red eyes shifted over Count. "Don't let it happen again, Count Murciélago," he said, drawing out the sound of Count's

name. Another phrase he said every morning. He strode a few feet away from the group, keeping his back turned. "Since you've kept us all waiting, you can get in the ring and spar with Black."

One of the young men between Count and Surely whipped his head around to glare at Count with glowing copper-yellow eyes. His long black hair was neatly groomed, framing his face perfectly. Black was one of Surely's twin nephews, a pair of twenty-year-olds who routinely flattened Count for sport.

"Seriously? Again?" Count asked. "You know he'll crush me!"

Surely ignored him.

Black slowly climbed to his feet, twirling to face Count. With a sharp-toothed grin, he sidled forward. Bending his lithe body down to whisper in Count's ear, he said, "Come on, dance with me."

Count scooted backwards, repelled by Black's rancid tuna breath.

"Clear the area," Surely commanded.

The rest of the group scattered into the trees behind the stream, even Black's twin brother White, who moved more reluctantly.

"You know the drill," Surely said, waving a hand dismissively as he walked towards the stream. In one swift movement, he leapt across the slow-moving body of water, landing surefooted on the other side.

As the class punching bag, Count certainly did know the drill. It didn't matter what he did, he always got pummeled. He could make the first move, opening his mage pressure on the offensive or the defensive. He could wait for his opponent to open their pressure first. He could do absolutely nothing and be flattened like a pancake under his classmates' pressure.

And asking him to go up against either of the twins guaranteed Count would become breakfast food.

Count stepped further into the clearing, facing Black, with his hands balled into fists at his sides. Black hunched his shoulders and jammed his hands into his pockets. He could've been waiting in line for a milkshake.

A buzzing began in Count's consciousness as the trainer opened his mage pressure. It was a sensation he had learned to equate to danger. He flinched but observed no reaction in the rest of the students. With a mumbled Méjà invocation, Surely manipulated his pressure to create a dome of stream water around himself and the copse of trees. Since he held it there with reserves from his conduit, the humming in Count's mind ceased. The cascading water would protect the bystanders from the pressures' weight. Count's own pressure was little more than the nuisance of a fly buzzing around someone's head, but the only one of their peers Black couldn't outright crush was White, so Surely's barrier was more than necessary.

You're not going to crush me this time, Count thought.

Now blurred by the cascading barrier of water along with Count's poor vision, Surely inclined his head to start the match. Count made the first move. Using pressure reserves pooled in his vein-like conduit, which ran under his skin alongside his actual blood, he uttered the cast invocation.

The pressure engulfed Count as he leaped into the air. His body convulsed and shrank, the transformation knocking the breath from him. His arms popped into wings, his body into a furry brown abdomen, and his legs into talon-studded feet. Then, as a bat, he flapped wildly, climbing high into the afternoon sky. Sunlight seared his eyes, dazzling his vision with white-hot spots. Count quirked his head to one side, squeezing them shut.

"I thought I had seen it all," Black hissed from the ground. "But apparently not." Louder, he added, "Running away, are we? We'll just see about that."

Count flapped his wings harder. He rose up and up and up. The canopy of leaves embraced him for a few heartbeats before he burst through to the other side and climbed higher than even the tallest tree in the forest. The clearing became no larger than a chocolate chip cookie below him. The sun scorched his brown body, and the warm, heavy air was hard to breathe, but Count had to keep going. *This is the only way to avoid his pressure*, he thought, past fights proving that any of his invocations would fail.

"Coward!" Black shouted.

Maybe so, Count thought, wincing.

"If your opponent was anyone else, Black, you'd just be giving him an opportunity to come up with a way to kill you," Surely said, his flat voice only reaching Count due to his sensitive ears. "Open your pressure and finish him off already. You could try the arrow invocation or the net invocation we've been working on. Hesitation leads to annihilation."

Count was tired of hearing that. Though on most occasions, his opponents weren't *hesitating*. Rather, they were playing a game of cat and mouse with him in which the only real challenge was seeing who could keep the game going the longest.

"Yes sir," Black responded.

Count slit his eyes open and gazed back down at the ground. Black had turned his face upwards and shielded his eyes against the sun with one hand. He was too far away for Count to make out more than the color of his face.

The air was silent as Count flapped harder, putting more and more distance between him and Black. The sun baked his body. He closed his eyes again, angling his large ears towards

the ground. The faintest of sounds drifted up to him on the still air. At first it was just a few slow pops. Then it rapidly increased to several pops a second until Count's ears were filled with the crackling and hissing of electrical current.

His fur tingled as he became aware of a moderately powerful mage opening his pressure from the ground below. Count flattened his ears against his head, but it could not block out the buzzing. It trilled in a different tune than Surely's. This he knew to be Black's rhythm.

The muscles in his arms screamed as he beat his wings harder. On his next upstroke, Count felt a rush of air before Black's pressure engulfed him, tangling around his body like the nets humans used to fish from the river. The buzzing vanished, replaced by a high-pitched screeching sound within the confines of Count's skull. The net squeezed his entire body and the buildup in his mind squashed his consciousness. He could barely breathe, gasping in shallow breaths through his nostrils.

Count dropped like a stone from the sky. The pressure remnants were sucked right out of his conduit. His body stretched and snapped back to his human form as he plummeted to the ground. He hit the ground a lot faster than he should have, smacking his head against the grass. His back throbbed from the fall and his arm muscles pulsed. His mind continued to buzz for a few moments before that faded as well.

Black's pressure snapped shut. All of a sudden, the gentle cascading of Surely's water barrier was the only sound. It honestly came as no surprise that no one had bothered to catch him.

I guess you can't escape pressure by going up, he absently thought as his head lolled against the grass and the sun beat down on his eyelids.

“Very good, Black,” Surely proclaimed. “Now, before we break into individual exercises, I have some news. District Fengso will be participating in the Selection this year. The recruiter will be here tomorrow.”

Count bolted upright at the words, head woozy from the sudden motion. A warm rush of adrenaline soothed the aches in his body. A recruiter was his chance to leave District Fengso’s neighborhood of First Cluster and get into the Academy. Each year, one was sent to every district with a high enough concentration of young mages so that two between the ages of sixteen and twenty could be selected to attend the Academy. There, they would train with highly educated teachers who would prepare them for a glorious high-ticket career in protecting the humans. Count had heard about the Selection from his parents before they passed, though they’d never had the opportunity to attend.

Too bad the news spoiled his hopes like biting into a rotten peach. As soon as the recruiter arrived, Surely would parade Black and White around with all their skills without allowing the recruiter to consider anyone else. But Count had to bite into that peach anyway. With his abilities, he wasn’t good enough to be a trainer, so the Academy was his only shot to be a mage worthy of protecting the humans.

“Now, to prepare, we’ll break into individual exercises,” Surely said. “Everyone find some space to practice the shield invocation I taught you last week.”

The stream splashed as students crossed back over. Count scrambled to his feet and hurried to the edge of the clearing. As soon as his classmates started accessing their pressure, the back of his mind became abuzz with the sound. Surely wove through them, making certain that they were far enough apart to avoid competing with each other for space.

Count leaned against a tree, catching his breath. The shield invocation would only help him if he came upon a mage weaker than himself.

A powerful pressure hummed in the back of his mind. Count opened his eyes and scanned the clearing where his peers practiced. Surely stopped to inspect the shield erected by White. None of them could possibly be the source of the new pressure. The cadence was more rapid than any of his classmates and the sound much too loud, almost overbearing.

Though Count hadn't fully recovered yet, he wanted to continue working on an invocation he was creating. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and reached for his mage pressure. He popped it open like an umbrella. The invisible dome radiated only a short distance from his body. Though it wasn't much, it would allow him to start drawing up invocations. Surely often said that only elite mages could create a brand-new invocation. Sometimes the Méjà words Count strung together didn't fit quite right, but he was becoming better at invoking his intention.

The distant mage pressure battered Count's consciousness, seeming like an attack on all sides. He took a levelling breath and murmured the words for his invocation. The pressure around him congealed between his hands, slipping around and over itself. He extended his arms, fingers creating an O shape. With a few more Méjà words, the pressure shot out in a pattern of sheer, white, concentric circles. It was the sort of thing that Count believed his echolocation would look like if someone could actually see the sound.

The rings expanded wider the farther away from the point of origin they went. Soon, the rings were well beyond the trees and lost to Count's sight. He hoped the distant buzzing didn't go away before the rings found it.

“At least now I know why you’re such a miserable failure,” Surely said from behind him.

The words took Count off guard. “Why would you say that?”

“Because I see you here making smoke rings instead of getting in any real practice,” Surely said.

“It’s...something I’m working on.” Even Count thought that sounded lame.

Surely’s feet clopped, hoof-like, over the grass and stones of the clearing until he entered into Count’s peripheral vision. He leaned back against a nearby tree and folded his arms across his chest as he was wont to do. “Alright then. Let’s see what it can do.”

Count almost dropped his stance. He couldn’t believe what Surely had said, *and* the echolocation pressure rings were still going. He felt them. If he tapped into the pressure they carried, he’d be able to see where they were. It had taken a good number of years to make that part of the invocation worth anything, even if the rings had yet to make it far enough to bounce off of another mage’s pressure. If they had, it would’ve allowed him to calculate how far away the mage was, much like how he could use sound to navigate the landscape at night.

Surely wanted to see what he could do. Surely was looking at him as more than the twins’ punching bag. *He’s going to end up laughing at me*, Count thought. “Sure thing.”

The foreign buzzing grew weaker. In the next moment, a separate and much stronger humming started, the pattern different than the first. The sound of it was so intense that it nearly blocked out the original sensation. Count felt the shift in his conduit like juice sloshing wildly in a shaken glass. The two mages seemed to be close to each other and maybe even had their pressures colliding.

The rings slowed down and frayed at the edges. He didn't know how far they had gone, only that this was much farther than they had ever gone before, and they hadn't even run into the powerful mage pressure yet. Before they completely vanished, Count opened himself up to them. The vision of the forest bled away in favor of a rocky outcrop overlooking the ocean. He floated directly toward the cliff face, high above the water. Here, a cave so black he couldn't see inside marred the rock. A man stood at the top of the cliffs, just above the cave's opening. His long, wavy black hair whipped around, concealing his face. His arms were spread wide to his sides as he stared over the ocean.

The second, more powerful pressure came from this man. Count couldn't see the other mage, but the intensity of the original pressure meant he was nearby.

The black-haired mage's head snapped in Count's direction. His own pressure wrinkled and rippled, sending a burst of energy through the rings. Before they dissipated completely, the black-haired mage's words pulsed through Count: *"Think about it this way, Rogue, we can never lie in our dreams."*

Count collapsed to his knees, head pounding like his brain had been split open with a wood-gatherer's ax. A scream gurgled up his throat, but the sound died on his tongue. He closed his pressure, using what remained in his conduit to soothe the pain. It had taken a lot out of him to hold the weight for so long, even without the added stress of having the rings banished.

"Well?" Surely asked.

The rings had succeeded in locating the mage who had caused the buzzing, but they hadn't been able to return to him. Count gathered one thing about their location; they were far from the landlocked District Fengso.

"Was it another failure?" Surely asked.

Shifting to sit on the ground, Count looked up at Surely. "You know how you can feel that vibration in your head when a nearby or a powerful mage opens their pressure?"

The trainer tilted his head to one side. "What are you talking about?"

Surely was the last person Count wanted to be having this discussion with, but a small part of him realized that this could be his ticket out. "For as long as I can remember, I've been able to feel it when mages open their pressure," Count said. "The stronger they are, the more I can feel it, even if they're at a great distance. But I didn't think just knowing that a strong mage opened his pressure was good enough. I need to be able to locate the mage for it to do me any good." Count didn't want to use the words *so I can run in the other direction* but that was the truth of it.

"I've never heard of a mage possessing such a keen sense of other mages," Surely said. The words were flat. "What does that have to do with your smoke rings?"

Surely hardly ever acted impressed, even when it came to the twins, so Count still had hope that this would mean something to him. "I'm a bat." Count rubbed at his right eye underneath the sunglass lens. "My eyes don't see as well as everyone else's, so I use echolocation to navigate."

"Yes, I know the sort," Surely said. "You aren't the first mage like that I've met."

Count doubted that there was another pathetic bat-mage on the planet, but he wasn't about to argue. "So I created this invocation that would mimic echolocation, but for finding the mage pressure that I feel. The idea is that the rings will connect with the other mage's pressure, bounce off, and return to me so that I can use my pressure to ascertain the other mage's location." Count dropped his gaze. "It hasn't exactly been that successful yet, though I have managed to

embled my perception into the rings so I can see where they're going."

Surely was quiet for a moment. He shifted his weight, curling one ankle around the other. "Did you see the mage you felt just now? Your eyes were glazed over like you weren't here."

"I did but..." Count said, allowing his voice to trail off. *The black-haired mage said Rogue. Could he have meant Rogue Lion? Or was I just imagining that he said anything at all?* Rogue was known to be the world's most powerful mage. Even a wimpling like Count had heard of him. But Rogue had disappeared and hadn't been seen in a good number of years. Surely wasn't likely to believe he had heard the name at all. "There were actually two."

"How far away were they?"

"Far," Count said. "Must be the other side of the world."

Surely laughed like someone had slammed a pie into Count's face. "Why should I believe you, huh?" he said. "I can stand here and tell you all day that I felt a powerful mage open up his pressure *on the other side of the world*, and you'd have no proof of the truth. You're just a filthy, lying vermin. Don't bother to show up for training tomorrow. The recruiter will be here, and you don't have a chance by the moons to be selected."

The words smooshed Count's spirit like squeezing a banana too hard. He opened his mouth to say something—anything—to defend himself. He couldn't think of anything to say. Surely whirled around and stalked away without giving him a chance. The trainer was right. About all of it. Count had no proof.

He wasn't even worth the recruiter's time. Going to the Academy was just an absurd dream. Determination creased Count's face as he glared at Surely's retreating form. *I'll show you and your condescending look. Someday this*

B. M. Valdez

invocation will be successful, but first, tomorrow the recruiter is going to learn how special I am.

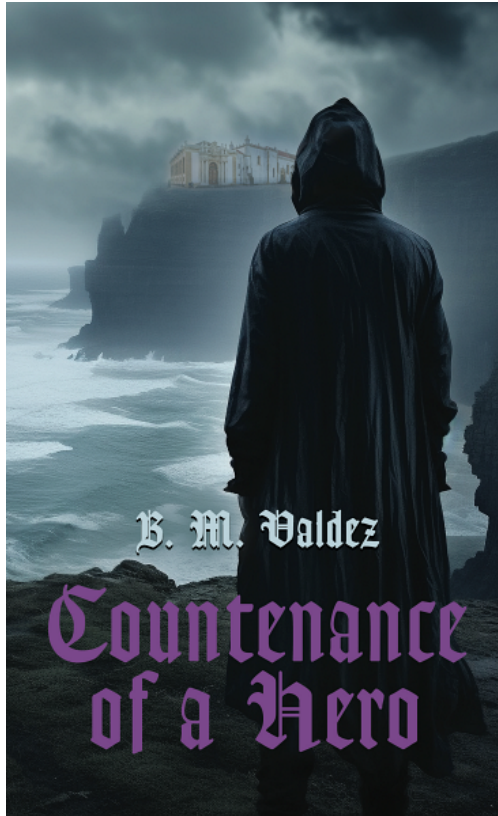
About the Author

B. M. Valdez has been writing since he was a child in elementary school. Though he writes a broad range of genres, including everything from dark fantasy to science fiction and even contemporary romance, Valdez considers himself an author of queer stories above all else. Valdez is passionate about the LGBTQIA+ community, and his work always features a diverse cast of characters representing this community. *Relapse* is his first published novel.

When he isn't writing, Valdez enjoys spending time with his sibling playing video games, watching movies, or just generally having a good time. He can often be found covered in pet hair from his two dogs and one cat. He lives in the Washington D. C. region of the east coast, though will always remember growing up on the Oregon Coast.

Without readers, B. M. Valdez would not have the opportunity to continue sharing his stories! He would love to connect with readers and can be found on the various sites below. You can find exclusive rough excerpts of other projects, short stories and chapbooks, character concept art, and more through these channels. Please also consider leaving a review for this book on Goodreads, Amazon, or any other platform.

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