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MAGNUS KIR

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The Once-Dancing Townsman

An early morning breeze wisped through the ivy-covered window and funneled between the toes of a twelve-year-old boy, causing him to squirm into his habitual good morning stretch. Zack opened his eyes to the same sight he had seen every morning since the day he was born. The glow of the moon had melted and the first sun had smeared burnt orange on his silicon ceiling. He didn't even rub his eyes; this first sun wasn't much brighter than the shimmering blue moon.

As the boy finished his stretch, he heard a strange whistle whiz overhead, finishing with a massive explosion. When his feet hit the dirt floor the ground uncontrollably rumbled. He burst out of bed and toward the cylindrical hole in the wall of his home. Zack brushed back the ivy that hung over his small portal and poked out his head. As another firework exploded, a breathtaking burst of blue reflected off Zack's glassy cheeks. His jaw involuntarily dropped open. Zack was so awestruck that he took no notice of little Curdie, who had sprung from her home nearby and screamed in glee. She ran toward the commons with a gaggle of other children, her arms bouncing and swimming through the air in excitement.

Little Zack vaulted out of his room and interrogated his mother on his way through the main portion of his adobe home. "Mom? Why didn't you wake me up? They've started without me!" As he pulled aside the curtain that was the door to his home, his mother barked, "Son, where do you think you are going?" Zack stopped in his tracks.

“To the commons...” Zack snapped as he stood in the doorway.

“You know you need to eat before you go.” Zack’s mother dropped a plate full of eggs and a slice of bread on the table.

Zack hustled to his seat and sat in front of the plate while complaining, “Come on, Mom.... First you don’t wake me up, then I have to sit here and eat? Joel and Ben are waiting on me and the fireworks have already started!”

“They can wait. You know that there will be at least two more hours of fireworks. The first sun just came up and we have plenty of time before the second sun makes it too bright for your fireworks.”

“But I’ll miss the commencement.”

“No, you won’t Zack. We have plenty of time before commencement and the grand finale. So eat up.” Zack started devouring the eggs as his mother wandered back into the kitchen.

His mother quickly went back to work. She hovered over a large bubbling tub that sat on the kitchen’s dirt floor and scrubbed away at last night’s pots and pans. She yelled from the other room, “Zack, you do know why this day is so important, don’t you? It’s not all about fireworks and games....”

Zack mumbled with his mouth overflowing with eggs, “Sure, it’s the Day of Refuge.”

“Well, I know you know what *day* it is, but why is it so important?”

“Um....” Zack continued to chew. “It’s to celebrate our wall.”

“Yes, but why?” his mother returned.

Zack looked puzzled and didn’t answer.

His mother stopped washing the dishes, wrung her hands with a towel, and walked back over to the table. “Zack, years ago things were not like they are today. We didn’t have our wall. Our people lived in fear of being attacked by our neighbors. Our men always had to be prepared for battle. There are apparently some pretty wild and strange creatures out there.... They don’t look like us,

and some are pretty vicious. Of course, they don't care about the laws of Magnus Kir."

Zack tilted his head and wondered aloud, "What do they look like, Mom?"

"Oh, I don't know, son; I haven't been there. And this all happened before I was born. But I do know that there were many battles with many different types of fierce beasts. It got to the point that one of our kings decided to just build a massive wall and be done with it; and that's what we did. Many people worked on this wall for years. You should be thankful for it."

Zack's mom was right. Their community was different; it had secluded itself. Zack's village was encompassed by a massive structure—a great wall, if you will. It was no mere wall like those that are built to protect a farmer's flock or even the thick walls built to imprison society's criminals; this was a wall that was so massive that it would be the standard by which every future wall would be compared.

Zack gobbled down the last of his breakfast. "Oh, trust me, Mom. I'm thankful. Now can I go?"

His mother took a deep breath and reluctantly answered, "Yes, Zack, you may go."

With a flash he was out the doorway and had bolted toward the commons. He passed the community band that was tuning its instruments for a long morning's worth of music. He flew by the village's lone brew master who had all of his wooden cups set out on the outdoor tables and was tapping one of the barrels in front of his tavern. On his way through the village, Zack passed Ben's home, where his family was cooking a large piece of meat in their fire pit. He didn't see Ben, so he simply smiled and waved on his way by, assuming that his friend had already left.

Finally, he got to the center of town: the village commons. Oh, it wasn't much to look at. It was merely a large yard that sat at the

foot of the king's White Tower. But for the children, it was where they congregated and played, and on the Day of Refuge it was the best seat in the house for the fireworks display.

Zack first met up with Joel. "Hey, have you seen Ben?"

"No, not yet," Joel replied.

"What do you want to do first?" Zack and Joel had a multitude of options for the day. The village was bustling with artisans setting up easels, warriors sharpening their swords and arrows, and apprentice chefs carrying their prized cuisine, offering up the smell of their wonderful delicacies as they passed by.

Joel asked, "Do you want to go out to the weapon competitions? Or we could go play 'knights and monsters' with the swords..."

"No, I don't want to go out of the commons; I want to keep watching the fireworks and pick a good spot for the commencement. Plus, that stuff doesn't even start for a while."

Joel questioned, "What's the big deal about commencement? The king comes out and his herald yells stuff from that book."

Zack couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something special about commencement. "I don't know... I just like it." The most beloved part of Zack's day was when the king's herald stood before all of the inhabitants of Magnus Kir and told the story of the origins of the Day of Refuge. Only once a year was the *Palladia* (informally known as the *Book of Precedents*) scheduled to be presented and read, and while it was the same story every year, Zack couldn't wait to hear the retelling of the chronicle of the wall. The *Palladia* was a special book. Only the royal family and governing officers were able to study and read the words within that leather binding. Most of Magnus Kir's citizens didn't care, since it was mostly full of tedious rules and regulations, but Zack was curious about this book and would have given anything to be able to read for himself what was inside.

Joel shouted over the crackling pyrotechnics, “Why don’t we go see if the baker has put out some of his elderberry pies? It’s right around the corner; we’ll be back in no time.”

Zack didn’t answer; he just started running. Joel laughed and quickly followed.

A few minutes later the boys returned to the commons, along with Ben, whom they’d met on the way, as well as Curdie, who was always tagging along. Each had their faces splotched with elderberries. Zack wiped his face on his sleeve then noticed his shirt was streaked with blue goodness. “Oh, no. My mom’s going to kill me.”

At the base of the king’s massive White Tower, a stone balcony protruded from those ivory walls. Zack quickly forgot about his messy shirt when he noticed that some of the servants were on the balcony preparing for the king’s appearance. Zack and his friends hurried just underneath the ledge. Soon the rest of the community noticed and convened there as well. The king’s servants had placed his modest throne a few feet from the edge of the ivory railing. The throne’s red cushions and ornate woodwork revealed that this was a throne fit for a king. Blue and black flags embroidered with the symbol of Magnus Kir’s wall flowed in the gentle breeze. Two of the king’s servants stood beneath the flags with horns tilted up; they were prepared for his royalty to appear.

After much anticipation, King Amethyst emerged from the tablet-shaped doors of that grand tower. The trumpeters blew their horns, Zack and his friends clapped and cheered, and the rest of the community quickly followed suit. King Amethyst wore a dark purple cloak that dragged four feet behind him and was imprinted with a golden family crest across his back. He also had the Sword of the Kings strapped to his side, a sword that was once worn by King Jasper, the original king of Magnus Kir, and which had been worn by every king since.

Behind the king was a small procession of royalty. These were not his family, for this king had no family, but these were his officers—his herald, his guards, and even his servants—who followed him then stood in a perpendicular line behind him. The king waved with a smile on his face and triumphantly sat on his royal throne. He motioned to his herald, and the gentleman stepped forward and opened the leather-bound book.

Zack looked over at his friends to find Ben flicking Joel's ear. Ben covered his mouth, trying to restrain a laugh, as Joel rubbed his ear to try to stop the sting. Zack shook his head, but then he noticed Curdie at Joel's side, her eyes wide and fixed in anticipation for the telling of the great story and the celebration that followed.

Zack smiled and quickly turned back when he heard the herald proclaim in a voice that thundered with significance, "Many, many years ago, King Jasper decreed that we would become an isolated nation. After centuries of conflict with surrounding countries and various creatures, the death of our clansmen, and when no amount of diplomacy could bring peace and harmony to our society, our wise king declared that we would build this edifice: our refuge, our sanctuary, our wall. These were the words of King Jasper's decree:

"The wall is to be built the height of five of our tallest men and the same distance wide. It should be made with the most durable stone and formed into place with our thickest mortar. Both sides of the wall shall be tilted and skewed in such a way as to keep our young ones safely inside and our enemies conveniently unable to enter. The outside of our wall will be embedded with broken pottery, glass, and fractured tools so that any attempt at climbing our wall would result in serious injury. With the building of this refuge, we will save our people."

The herald took a breath. “It took over a century and the reign of two more kings to finish the wall. But on this day, in the tenth year of the reign of King Chalcedon, the wall was completed.” After finishing his speech, the herald gently closed the *Book of Precedents*, bowed to the king, and walked into the palace to return the beloved book to the room of antiquities.

With the crowd still silent, the king stood with his purple robe flowing in the wind and his golden crown shimmering. He then proclaimed with arms opened wide, “Let us celebrate our security, our safe asylum, and that which brings us our safety: our wall. I proclaim, with my authority as king, that the celebration of our wall will now commence!” With this declaration, the crowd roared, the fireworks exploded in their grand finale, and the band bellowed its song. Dancing erupted in every corner of town. The king, after his proclamation, waved to the crowd and withdrew to the inner sanctum of his palace.

The atmosphere was one of sheer joy. The streamers flowed and the ground thundered with the stomping of villagers’ feet. Food and drink were abundant, and families and friends rotated between the feasting tables, sporting events, and dances on the green.

After a plentiful lunch, Zack circled up with Ben and Joel and a handful of friends to play a game they had invented. (The boys said that Curdie, although she said she was tough, wasn’t allowed to play. So she sat with folded arms and pouty face at a nearby table.) Each of the boys held hands and ran round and round until one of them couldn’t hold on any longer and would fall to the ground. This game, which they called “rattletraps,” inevitably ended with each and every one of them tumbling to the ground and laughing uncontrollably. After one of these contests, all of the boys gleefully piled on Zack, since he was the first to fall to the ground. As he was lying there among the adolescent bodies,

an arrow appeared from thin air and pierced the ground with a quick “thwmp,” just inches away from him. It stuck straight out of the grass right in front of his eyes. Even with his body tense with terror, he was still able to let out a terrifying scream; the boys around him scattered. Panic ensued.

The same messenger who had previously heralded in the celebration of the Day of Refuge now exclaimed at the top of his lungs, “Arrows!” The bands’ instruments clanked as they hit the ground; the performers had all run for cover. Easels and tables toppled over as parents rushed to grab their children.

While everyone else in the town scurried from danger, Zack could not get up. He was so shocked by his near-death experience, his muscles would not move! While he gawked at the enlarged dart that nearly took his life, he was unaware that arrows sporadically landed across the commons where the townsfolk were once dancing. His mother spotted him from the other side of the green and yelled, “Get up, Zachary! Run!” Since Zack’s father had passed away many years earlier, his mother was forced to look helplessly to the other men in the crowd for help.

Curdie sat under a wooden picnic table nearby and watched in terror as another arrow pierced within inches of Zack’s arm. She couldn’t stand it. Somehow she thought covering her ears with her hands, closing her eyes, and screaming in horror would fix things.

When Zack still did not move, Jameson, the town’s blacksmith, lumbered across the yard and picked Zack up by the belt. As Zack dangled from the arm of the strongest man in town, his world distorted into slow motion. He scanned the landscape and noticed that there were quite a few arrows that had been shot into the yard. He started to count the number of arrows but stopped when his eye fixed on something else. A solemn, motionless figure lay on the ground: a woman dressed in white. An arrow

had pierced her side and the red of her lifeblood stained her once immaculate dress.

After a few minutes passed and the arrows subsided, the mother of the young woman ran to her side, screaming, “Maybelline! Maybelline! Oh, Maybelline ...”

Others followed, including the village physician, but his intervention was too late. The young woman was gone. The mother, after her initial shock, began screaming about the wall and at the wall, and even to that individual beyond her grasp. “Who could have done this? What horrible creature you must be to shoot arrows over our wall! You’ve killed my daughter ... my only daughter...” As the women of the community tried hopelessly to calm the grieving mother, whispers permeated the crowd.

One uttered, “Do we need to make it taller?”

“Heightening the wall would be a daunting task,” said another.

“Sure we could make it taller, but would it keep this sort of thing from happening? Their arrows could pierce the moon!”

While all of this commotion was occurring, a small mob of people appeared on the horizon. They were shouting and screaming indistinct noises that could not quite be made out. Zack tugged on his mother’s arm. “Mother, look over there! What are they doing?” She just stared at the mob with eyes squinted and brows furrowed as if she hadn’t heard the question. As Zack looked intently into the distance, someone grabbed his hand. He looked down; it was Curdie. He shook her off as he normally did, but this time was different. He glanced back at the dead woman lying on the ground, then at the oncoming mob, then he looked down at Curdie; all he could see was the top of her head, but he could distinctly hear her soft sobs. As he reached down to take hold of the hand he’d cast off, Curdie’s head leaned against his arm. A soft whisper followed. “It’s going to be all right, Curdie.”



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