

King Magnus II

King Magnus II stood at the palace window with his eye pressed against his telescope. Across the water, he could see the smoke rising from the cheese puff factory on the neighboring island of Snill.

The king had always known that the Snillians were going to be trouble. His father had warned him about it. “Never trust a person with olive skin, big eyes and curly hair,” his father had told him. And right he was. Whenever Snillians came to his island of Nytta to deliver a shipment of cheese puffs, the king would send his spies to follow them and make sure they weren’t stealing things or causing trouble. The spies had never caught the Snillians in any illegal activities, but they did assemble an impressive list of outrageous behavior, such as drinking club soda before noon, eating bananas with a fork and praying to a God that went by the name of Rumda.

Add all of those things together and the king had a strong argument that the Snillians were planning to take over his island.

The king lifted his eyes from the telescope and rubbed his hands together as he looked down at the harbor where twenty-five ships were awaiting his command. Within a week, he planned to attack Snill before they could attack him.

In the adjacent room, the king found Ira Butkus writing his daily media memo. Like many of his memos, this one revolved around one of the king’s “gems of wisdom,” a term Butkus himself had created. The king had such a superior intellect that many commoners had trouble understanding him. Butkus took it upon himself to help those who suffered from low IQs by translating these gems of wisdom into simpler language. It took a lot of the pressure off of the common folks who were unsure if they should applaud or not as they stood in the courtyard listening to the king give one of his fabulous speeches from the palace balcony. Sometimes people would fail to laugh when the king said something funny or fail to shout praises when the king uttered one of his gems. This always resulted in scorn from the more intelligent islanders. Now, slower folks could applaud along with everyone else, and then read the newspaper later to find out what they had been applauding for.

The king grabbed the memo away from Butkus and looked at it with suspicion.

“Cut off your nose and put spice on your face,” the king read from the memo.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You said that yesterday at the banquet,” Butkus explained. “I was writing a . . .”

“I said no such thing.” The king crumpled the paper and threw it in the trash.

“We’ve got bigger fish that fly, so stop with this nuisance. Snill has struck us once and we can’t sit around while they plan their next attack.”

“Snill?”

“The island to the east of us,” said the king.

“I’m familiar with Snill,” said Butkus, “but when did they attack us?”

The king glared at him in frustration. “The pretzel factory, you umbilical! Have you already forgotten about the pretzel factory?”

“But the men who burned down the pretzel factory . . .” Butkus cut himself short, seeing the dementia growing in the king’s eyes. “Yes, of course, Sire. What do you suggest we do?”

“We beat them to the punch, or whatever they drink on Snill. I’m sending the army in next week.”

“It will take them at least a month to prepare for an attack of that magnitude.”

“That’s why I gave them the order two months ago.”

Butkus knew it would be hard to convince certain people that the attack on Snill was in retaliation for last week’s fire at the pretzel factory, especially when the king had been planning the attack for two months. Worse yet, the fire had actually been started by four immigrants from Flink (an island ten miles north of Snill). But it would be useless to attack Flink. It was a poor, desolate island that had no factories or natural resources. Although these were mere technicalities that weren’t important in matters of war, some people tended to frown on them.

“Send out a memo,” said the king. “Let the people know that their king hears their cries of sorrow, that I understand what they’re going through and that I won’t sleep until the catapults who burned down the factory are caught and pillaged. God will give them justice, and he will give it to them through me.”

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Gill O’My stood on the pedestal shouting the news to the people. He was a robust man with a booming voice. Of all the speakers on the island of Nytta, Gill was the most brilliant. No one had ever won a debate against Gill, mainly because he never let anyone else talk and threw temper tantrums whenever anyone contradicted him, which won him the confidence of the people.

Spittle flew from his mouth as he reminded the people how angry they were about the pretzel factory burning to the ground, and how devastating it was to their economy. “The arsonists have brought destruction to our peaceful island,” he yelled. “The king has vowed vengeance for the havoc wreaked upon us. As you know, the four Flinkians responsible for this atrocity have escaped from Nytta, but not back to Flink as we previously thought, but to the island of Snill.”

The audience gasped at this news, for everyone knew that Snill and Flink were sworn enemies and had been for hundreds of years.

“We were all fooled by their deceit, their pretence of hatred. But King Magnus II, the wisest of all kings, was not fooled. Not for a minute. He has uncovered their ploy to obliterate our island—a conspiracy lead by King Trok himself.”

Butkus stood at the back of the crowd, grinning. He loved Gill O’My. The man was one of the truest patriots on the island of Nytta. Without questioning, he took every memo that was given to him and delivered its message passionately to the people. Speakers like O’My were common on Nytta. They were employed by the newspapers, who sent them out to arouse interest in the news so the people would buy more papers. O’My worked for a paper called Wolfhound, which (like all newspapers) had taken strict vows that they would research all stories and deliver them without bias to the people. Sometimes, however, the unbiased truth wasn’t what was best for the people, and Wolfhound knew it. The newspaper had close ties with King Magnus II and did its patriotic duty of touting the king’s superior ideas of democracy.

“King Trok is an evil man consumed with hate,” O’My shouted from his pedestal. “He hates our freedom. He hates his own people. But most of all, he hates you.” He pointed his finger at the crowd, who shuddered to think that King Trok had a personal hatred for each and every one of them, but if Gill O’My said it was true, then it was true.

Wolfhound paperboys circulated through the crowd, telling everyone that they could read all of the details for themselves and be the first to spread the terrible news to their families and friends, all for the price of a paper.

“I always knew the Snillians were evil,” said one man as he purchased a paper. “They don’t even believe in Tungu.”

Tungu was the Nyttan god, who had created the islands by sweeping crumbs from his heavenly table. The island of Nytta was the largest of the islands, which of course meant that Tungu loved them the most. This was probably why none of the other islands believed in him. Instead, they believed in ridiculous gods, like Rumda, who had created the stars merely by exposing his sparkling smile. The Nyttans scoffed at this idea. It didn’t even make sense. Everyone knew that Tungu had created the stars with a sneeze, and anyone who thought differently was in danger of hellfire.

The Nyttans were god-fearing people. They knew that every storm or accident or broken fingernail was brought upon them by the wrath of Tungu. And this wrath was to be avoided at all costs. Butkus, worried that the people didn’t see the similarities between King Magnus II and Tungu, sent out dozens of media memos to enlighten them. The intellectual Nyttans saw the connection right away, but it took some of the others longer to realize that the king had been chosen by God himself, and that not believing in King Magnus II was not only unpatriotic, it was also sacrilegious.

Climbing down from his pedestal, O’My received a dozen gold coins from Butkus. It warmed his heart to know that he was doing so much for his fellowman, that with a few well-placed tantrums, he was serving both his country and God. Snatching a paper away from one of the paperboys without paying for it, he shoved his way through the crowd and wobbled home.

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“The king and his damn cheese puffs,” said Hans Moyton as he looked at the newspaper. Moyton was one of the strangest men on Nytta and everyone knew that when he died the devil would be there to greet him. He didn’t support the king, which meant he didn’t support Tungu, which meant he was evil. Even Wolfhound and O’My denounced him as a nitwit.

Moyton was one of those wretched heathens who had been consumed by the world. Everything he preached was cynical and silly. He referred to Wolfhound as a branch of the government, whose sole purpose was to shove the king’s agenda down the throats of its readers. He was also the first to speak out against the king when he raised the taxes of the poor and lowered the taxes of the rich. He even had the audacity to claim that the king considered the poor to be disposable serfs who only existed to serve the rich.

However, the people were too wise to be deceived by Moyton’s ridiculous assertions. He seemed to think that just because the majority of Nyttans were poor that they would be quick to support him and rebel against the king. What Moyton failed to realize was that he was dealing with well-educated people who read the Wolfhound daily. They, therefore, knew about the close friendship that the king had with Tungu and that he

was a very righteous man. While Moyton spewed out his useless facts about how the island had plunged into debt and how thousands of jobs had been lost since King Magnus II took reign, he conveniently left out the one detail that mattered most: that the king went to church every Sunday.

Grabbing his hat, Moyton marched into the village, climbed upon the pedestal and began telling the people why attacking Snill was a bad idea. Some people gathered around, but most walked on past. They could already guess that his speech would be unpatriotic and filled with radical ideas. Also, Moyton's speeches weren't as much fun as O'My's. Moyton didn't scream or stomp his feet or tell people to shut up when they interrupted him. Instead, Moyton calmly laid out the facts, which did nothing but confuse everybody.

"Cheese puffs," he said to those who would listen. "That's what this is all about: cheese puffs. And the king won't rest until he has them. The pretzel factory meant nothing to the king. As everyone knows, he has a deep-seated phobia of pretzels."

There were a few hums of agreement in the audience. The king had once been a devoted fan of the pretzel, until he nearly choked to death on one. After that he froze at the mere sight of pretzels. They were forbidden inside the palace, and when he walked through the village, anyone caught in possession of a pretzel within a hundred yards of the king was sentenced to a year in prison without trial.

After the near-death pretzel incident, the king had turned his attention to the savory taste of cheese puffs. They were softer than pretzels and less likely to stick in his windpipe. The problem was that the best factory was on Snill, and this problem was compounded by what Moyton referred to as the "thus factor," which follows: The king imposed a high import tax on all products from Snill. Thus, most Nyttans could only afford to eat cheese puffs on special occasions. Thus, cheese puffs weren't a very hot seller on Nytta. Thus, the Snill factory began shipping fewer crates. Thus, cheese puffs became rarer and even more expensive.

King Magnus II demanded that King Trok export more cheese puffs, and Trok said he would be happy to oblige if the king would lower the import tax. But King Magnus II wouldn't budge. He said that he had a strict policy of never lowering taxes except for rich Nyttans, and he certainly wasn't going to lower them for someone who didn't even worship the same god that he worshipped. Trok responded by cutting off all shipments of cheese puffs to Nytta. Outraged, King Magnus II ordered a factory to be built on Nytta, but the texture and flavor of domestic cheese puffs were inferior to those produced on Snill. This left him with just one option: war.

The audience mumbled when Moyton explained the king's true motivation for attacking Snill. It went against everything they'd read in the Wolfhound and made the king sound stupid and petty, which everyone knew was ridiculous. Some of the more foolish members of the audience were actually taken in by Moyton's argument, but even they weren't foolish enough to voice their approval. Speaking out against the king would do nothing more than win them the label of unpatriotic and wicked. Soon O'My would be denouncing them from his pedestal. Though everyone enjoyed hearing O'My publicly disgrace a fellow citizen, no one wanted to be that fellow citizen. The best cure for one of Moyton's brainwashing speeches was to go home, take a hot bath and read several copies of the Wolfhound.

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When the twenty-five ships left Nytta, King Magnus II was watching from the safety of his palace window. He watched as they made their way across the blue water as they approached Snill. Once they faded to mere specks on the horizon, the king went to his telescope. He saw the puffs of smoke as the ships shot their cannons into the coastal villages of Snill. Though it was too far to see the details or hear the booms of destruction, the king knew the Snillians didn't stand a chance against his army. Compared to Nytta, Snill was a miniscule island, with a small army equipped with outdated weapons.

"When life deals you lemons, drink orange juice," the king said to Butkus, who stood beside him at the palace window. "Trok has fed us lemons far too long. Now he and his evil umpire will drown in a sea of sour crapes. Unlike him, I am a devout king. I will stand at this window giving support to my army until this war is over. When that day comes, every Snillian will know that the only true god is the one with the biggest guns."

Butkus nodded. He had sent out a media memo claiming that the Snillians would merely lay down their weapons and welcome the Nyttans with open arms, thanking them for delivering their island from the oppression of King Trok. This news filtered down to Wolfhound, and then to O'My, who shouted it from his pedestal. The Nyttans began to think of themselves as saviors, realizing now that their god Tungu had sanctioned the war.

No god, not even one as ridiculous as Rumda, could support a tyrant like King Trok, who executed his own citizens for disagreeing with him or for singing off key. This didn't stop the Snillians from taking offense to having Nyttan troops invade their island. They mounted the fiercest defense they knew how, throwing stones and spears as the invaders stormed their villages. The Nyttan soldiers fought back with guns and cannons, aware that the resistance only came from those who supported Trok's tyranny; thus, killing them was justified and couldn't be considered murder since they didn't even believe in Tungu.

When word of the first day's battles reached the king, he strutted through the palace halls, congratulating everyone on a job well done. "The victor often gets spoiled," he told them as he repeated the news about the villages his troops had conquered on Snill. Things were going almost as well as he had expected, other than he had lost hundreds of his men within the first few hours of fighting. He had told all of his friends that none of his soldiers would be lost in this war. Now it appeared that Trok was trying to make a liar out of him.

The king found Butkus standing at the telescope, looking across the water at Snill. "You can't teach an old dog without sticks," The king said as he pushed Butkus out of the way so he could have a look. "Send out another one of those memo things that you write. Let the people know that I appreciate their sacrifices and now we need to sacrifice even more of our people for this just cause that we started. Raise the taxes of all those who have sent sons and fathers to help fight the war, and then recruit another thousand men and raise their family's taxes as well. This war is going to cost us dearly in money and men, but it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make."

King Magnus II was true to his word. He stood at the palace window throughout the duration of the war, except when he was eating or bathing or sleeping or entertaining company. To his relief, the war only lasted two days. When he received word of his triumph, he ran out on the palace balcony shouting "Victoria" as he did his victory dance. "There's more than one skin on a cat, which is why they have fur!" shouted the king to

the villagers who had gathered below him, eager to hear about their victory over Snill. In truth, the war was still raging, but the king declared it a victory the moment they had seized the cheese puff factory. How the rest of the war went was inconsequential.

“I feel the pain of those of you who lost loved ones in this war, but your sons and fathers have not died in Spain. They died on Snill, which consists of a bunch of unappreciative foreigners, who refused to allow us to take over their island in peace.”

Butkus stood in the doorway behind the king. He held a notepad so that he could write down any gems of wisdom that the king might bestow upon his audience. It was also necessary for him to stay nearby in case the king forgot what he was talking about and needed someone to remind him. Behind Butkus stood Gill O’My, who was memorizing the latest memo, which explained why the troops were still fighting even though the war was over.

“Have you found the arsonists yet?” yelled a grieving mother whose son had been killed during the raid on the cheese puff factory.

The king stammered. Questions always confused him and left him with a dazed look of bewilderment. “What arsonists?” he yelled back, and Butkus quickly stepped up behind the king and whispered in his ear. “Oh, the arsonists,” said the king. “We don’t care about the arsonists. This has never been about the arsonists. It’s about liberty, like I said right from the beginning.”

“What about the pretzel factory and your vow of vengeance?”

Butkus, who was responsible for making sure the king never came in contact with people who disagreed with him, turned to Gill O’My and told him to see what he could do to humiliate this grieving mother before this got out of hand.

“There are none so blind as the deaf!” the king shouted, and the crowd erupted in applause, realizing they were being blessed with one of the king’s gems of wisdom. “I will not back down to the accents of evil,” said the king. “Tungu told me to strike at Snill and strike them I did. We will give them justice. We will give them freedom. We will give them all of the wonderful blessings that we enjoy, even if we have to kill every last one of them.”

The crowd cheered. They loved their king. There was something comforting about his simple nature. No king had ever done more for his people or had ever stood so firmly for the cause of justice. It didn’t matter that the four arsonists were never found on Snill and that the intelligence agency could find no connection between King Trok and the island of Flink. These were nothing more than irrelevant facts, designed to confuse the people.

As the people celebrated in the streets, Butkus prepared a carriage to take the king away to his cottage on the south side of the island. It had been three weeks since his last vacation and he was exhausted. Before descending to the courtyard to meet his carriage, the king took one last look through his telescope. The sight filled his heart with joy. His struggle would soon be over and life would be good again. On the horizon he could see one of his ships returning from the island of Snill. To the average observer, the ship looked like nothing more than a vessel returning from battle. But the king wasn’t your average observer. He knew what this ship represented and that knowledge brought a tear to the king’s eye—for inside the ship’s cargo hold lay thirty crates of cheese puffs.