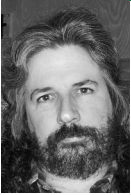


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/dev/random



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IN A LAND SO FAR AWAY EVEN MILITARY-grade GPS wouldn't help you find it, at an unspecified time in history left deliberately vague so the author wouldn't have to pay too much attention to bothersome period details, there flourished a noble kingdom by the sea which we shall call Metaphoria. The king of this noble kingdom happened by right fortuitous coincidence to be rather noble himself, although he did occasionally "forget" to file his tax return and had considerable difficulty remembering to put down the lid on the royal chamber pot (if you think you know where the term "chamber music" came from, bully for you. I have my own theory).

The thriving economy of this mostly benign monarchy was based largely on a marvelous and now tragically extinct commodity known as a Putti-Putti nut. These little botanical gems had myriad uses throughout society, from serving as simple foodstuffs to secreting an oily extract that kept their steel implements from rusting to providing bearings for carriage wheels. Generations of citizens earned their livelihood from gathering and selling the tiny marvels, which were produced in prodigious quantities by groves of magnificent Putti-Putti trees dotting the verdant landscape.

Putti-Putti commerce hummed along nicely for many years. Harvests were regulated at sustainable levels, nut wastage was kept to an absolute minimum, and in general anyone who needed a steady supply of nuts was able to fulfill that requirement. All was well until one sunny day when a clever tinkerer tinkering in the basement of the royal armory discovered that a specially prepared paste manufactured from dried and ground Putti-Putti nutshells could be ignited and the resultant explosion employed to propel heavy projectiles at great speed over long distances. Almost immediately the military might of the modest kingdom was dramatically increased. Border disputes that had dragged on for years with no diplomatic solution in sight were miraculously resolved overnight when Metaphoria held a public demonstration of their new-found technology.

With this new might came new threats, however. Up to now the practice of espionage had never really surfaced in Metaphoria, because they possessed nothing that everyone else didn't also have.

Neighboring kingdoms quickly realized that the potential for Putti-Putti paste was almost unlimited, both militarily and financially, and they wanted a piece of the pie. They all had plenty of nuts, but not the secret of the ballistic paste. After a few bungled burglary attempts, they formed a clandestine coalition that came to be known as ARMED (Allies Researching Metaphoria's Exploding Doohickeys). ARMED was determined to secure the strategic advantage of Putti-Putti paste for itself.

Eventually one of the tinkerer's (he now held the exalted title of Royal Nutmonger) relatives found the secret formula for Putti-Putti paste scrawled on a scrap of parchment in the Nutmonger's library. He sold it to ARMED for a whole chest full of currency and passage to the Idyllic Isle, where he lived as a comfortable recluse until he stepped on a highly venomous jellyfish and died in agony because there were no resident leeches on the island to treat him.

The balance of power was thus restored for a few years until the Metaphorian Royal Agriculturists developed a new fast-growing tree strain that produced far more potent nuts than the native variety. The same amount of paste could now propel an equivalent projectile three times further and faster than before. Metaphoria once more dominated the arms race. Having learned the physical security lesson from the first highly damaging information leak, all documents and processes related to paste development were now carefully guarded by thoroughly screened and indoctrinated soldiers with sharp swords and sharper vision. The military-grade trees were grown only in a heavily patrolled compound surrounded by thick stone walls twenty feet high.

Whereas the native trees were widely distributed throughout the kingdom and surrounding lands, the cultivars were found only within the protected compound and therefore the need arose to preserve under stringent accountability the nuts they produced. As each crunchy spheroid fell from the tree it was retrieved, numbered, and cataloged by a team of Nut Accountability Agents, who eventually had their titles shortened to just Accountant.

Meanwhile, development of novel and more powerful weapons to take advantage of the increased power of the enhanced paste proceeded around the clock. Many designs were tried and discarded in the search for the perfect ballistic device. The hustle and bustle in the armory had grown so extensive that it was no longer possible to house it near the compound where the cultivars were grown. A large, well-equipped facility was constructed two leagues distant, which meant that regular supplies of nuts had to be transported by armed courier between the compound and the new armory. This relocation doubled the auditing burden, however, since nuts had to be accounted for one by one as they were unloaded on the far end.

Nor had ARMED been idle all this time. They had instituted agent training programs to increase the efficacy and sophistication of their intelligence-gathering operations. They stationed agents in trees, on rooftops, and crouching in the tall grass along the nut transfer route, forcing Metaphorian military planners to change that route on a daily basis. This prompted ARMED to plant agents inside Metaphoria to relay the critical route information via carrier pigeon. Carrier pigeons then became a controlled technology, and a Metaphorian battalion was tasked with intercepting or shooting down all unauthorized pigeon traffic. ARMED countered by tattooing coded messages in a special disappearing ink on the backs of painstakingly trained lizards.

Thus was born Metaphoria's Reptile Interdiction Command, which soon outgrew its original mandate to encompass small mammals, birds, and certain

of the more intelligent lepidopterans. ARMED now added to its message-passing repertoire the tactic of engraving rocks and launching them from personal trebuchets. Metaphoria responded by removing all rocks smaller than a loaf of bread from a radius of ten leagues around the sensitive weapons development area and making possession of any such stone a capital crime.

One day an ARMED anti-nut specialist discovered that some of the native nuts in the courtyard of her research facility had been drilled full of holes and the matrix from which the explosive paste was manufactured neatly removed. Investigating further, she eventually traced the activity to a small previously unknown insect she named the Putti-Putti Nut-Boring Beetle. Working feverishly day and night, a team of hand-picked researchers bred a strain of super beetle to attack and render useless the modified nuts, a shipment of which had been captured in a daring daylight raid by ARMED nut commandoes.

Just as the Metaphorians were poised to embark on a major punitive campaign against the member nations of ARMED for their espionage activities, the nut-boring beetle was released and immediately wreaked havoc on the cultivar, not only destroying the nuts but boring into and killing the trees as well. Once the voracious insects had finished off the modified strain they started in on the native trees and killed every last one of them in their unstoppable march. Without Putti-Putti nuts the economy (82% of which had been devoted to military research and development) collapsed, famine swept the land, and the governments of both Metaphoria and the ARMED nations were overthrown by hungry mobs and their hapless leaders executed.

Carriage wheels stopped turning and all the plows, pitchforks, and swords rusted to powder, reducing the mobs that now controlled society to poking each other with pointed sticks until there was no one left in all the lands with two good eyes. What remained of the population therefore became easy prey for the horde of screaming barbarians who chose that moment to come swarming over the hills, and thus Metaphorian civilization was erased as though it had never existed at all.

Moral: When you allow nuts to dictate your security posture, it almost always ends badly.