

Long ago, a great king reigned over a great kingdom. One morning, he learned his most trusted advisor passed away after many years of devoted service. The great king mourned greatly. He called his other advisors to him.

"My most trusted advisor has died," the king said, and he wept. "We are to hold a great feast two weeks hence and, according to tradition, must gather the greatest treasures of this great kingdom, for display at the funeral. Go," he commanded. "Find them, bring them to me, that I may mourn my most trusted advisor."

The four advisors left the great city. The first advisor returned the next day, the second advisor returned two days later, the third three days later, and the fourth returned a week later. "What have you found and brought me, that I mourn my most trusted advisor?" he asked them.

The first advisor held out an ancient coin. "Your Majesty, I searched the nearby towns and found this old coin, which is of great value because it is of ancient date. This coin predates your family's benevolent rule by many centuries. It is a prize to the children of this great kingdom, and one of them offered it to me during my journey."

"It is a prize to a child," the king replied. "A child holds a smooth rock in one hand and a diamond in the other and regards both as pretty things. Children are young, and you are young. Coins of that ancient era are of no value and are melted to make trinkets. This is not a great treasure of this great kingdom."

"Forgive me, Your Majesty," the advisor said. "I am a young man and did not know."

The second advisor smiled and drew a sword from an ornate sheath. "O great king," he said. "I present to you the sword of a great hero, who served your father in greatness as your father served in greatness to his beloved people. The hero perished in battle many years ago, and his sword is kept by his family in remembrance of him."

"The sword of one dead man is of no use to another," the king replied. "It once was a sword, but for many years has been a treasure to that hero's family. It is a sword no longer, but an object for remembrance. It is certainly no treasure to me, for I mourn my most trusted advisor, and not this great hero. Let them keep it whose it is."

"Forgive me, O king," the advisor said. "I am not wise."

The third advisor stepped forward and gestured to the area around him. "O king, my lord," he said. "I ventured three days and found no treasure greater than this great palace and the great city in which it lies. From the crown upon thy head to the evening spoon that touches thy lips—these are the greatest treasures of all the kingdom, for there are none so precious as these."

The king frowned. "Mourning is about the mourned, not the mourner," he said. "I am grieved at the loss of my most trusted advisor and you seek to flatter and praise me? These are treasures, yes, but none so humble as the man who served me and my father these many, many years."

"Forgive me, my lord," the third advisor said, "I am not humble as thy most trusted advisor truly was."

The king frowned again. The four advisors hung their heads. "And you, what have you to say?" the king said to the fourth advisor. "I waited these seven days for you to return. Your horse returned with no rider the first night, and I and my house thought you dead. And here you are six days after. What have you to show for your long absence?"

“O great king, forgive me,” he said, bowing his head lower. “I set my heart to find the greatest treasures of this great kingdom and lost myself in the task. I have returned to find my lord sorrowing in my absence, greatly distressed.” The fourth advisor pushed forward a great chest and opened it, revealing a mound of silver and gold coins—some polished, many dirty with use—to overflowing. “But I return to bring thee the greatest treasure of this thy great kingdom: the treasures of thine own people, who gave me of their wealth and of their poverty to honor this great man who served thee and thy father so many, many years.”

The king sat up, eyes wide. He knew not what to make of this great display. He hesitated. “This...is a great treasure indeed.” He hesitated again. “My great people gave you of this treasure freely? Why? What cause have they to give of their hearts so abundantly for a man they hardly knew or, as I suppose, knew not at all?”

The fourth advisor raised his head. “Thy people gave me of their own great treasure in the marketplace of this great city when I spoke with them there, for I had a word to tell them, which is of great value.”

The king hesitated a third time. “Tell, what is of greater value than this great treasure? You may speak freely.”

The advisor straightened further. “I will tell thee how I came to be in the marketplace this day.

“Beyond the great mountain that divides this kingdom from another, and beyond the great sea, there lives a humble people—farmers—whose lands not thy father, but his father before him, conquered and established in peace. The soil in those lands is rich, and their harvests often plentiful and rich as well. The farmers there grow a certain sweet apple that cannot be found in any other land. It is said to be delicious and precious, and it ripens only every four years. The great people of this land have harvested these apples for centuries.

“On the first day out from this royal city, I journeyed northeast to the great mountain. I arrived by dusk and began to set up shelter for the night, before entering the mountain pass. As I set a fire to warm myself, bandits came from the shadows and surprised me and my horse. They beat me, stripped me, and robbed me, and they left me for dead. My horse spooked from the commotion and ran back the way I came, and I supposed her to have returned to the city. I was left with nothing, except a pair of pants I left by a stump, which the robbers appeared to overlook in the dim light of evening.

“Night set in, and dark clouds amassed overhead. Rain and thunder came quickly, and I was obliged to find shelter quickly, for I had not a shirt upon my back. Near the entrance to the mountain pass, I found a cave to cover my head. I slept a restless sleep in the cold of the cave, my head on a patch of soft soil.

“I awoke early in the morning, at the first sight of morning light. I was shivering and dirty. I could stay in the cave no longer with the expectation of any sleep, so I left the cave and entered the mountain pass, determined to continue my journey.

“Not halfway through the pass, I was seized by local officers traveling through, who did not know who I was and who supposed me to be an escaped prisoner of the town on the other side of the pass. No amount of pleading or explaining from my lips would fall on their ears or the ears of the prison guards, to whom I was delivered late that morning.

“Two nights passed in this unfortunate circumstance before another officer would pay me any notice. On the fourth morning of my journey, I heard two guards discuss plans to transport goods to a nobleman in a town on the other side of the great sea. The goods were to be guarded by two men, but the officers and guards were understaffed and therefore worried. ‘I can help,’ I shouted to them. ‘Tie me up, lock me up—whatever you want to do with me—and I will be a second man set watch over the transport.’ The short of this story is that, with some reasoning, they agreed to my suggestion, and that evening saw me on a boat crossing the great sea, bound hand and foot and tethered to the wall of a cargo hold.

“On the fifth day, in the late morning hours, the boat anchored at a harbor across the sea. The officer and I delivered the goods to the nobleman, who immediately recognized me as one of Your Majesty’s advisors. I was set free in that instant. The nobleman ensured I was properly clothed before he set me on a horse, and with a company, toward the village with the delicious and precious apples.

“The apples were precious indeed, and very delicious. The people of that village were gracious and humble, and remembered thy father with great fondness. When they heard of the passing of thy most trusted advisor, they wept with thee. They remembered him as a true friend to king and country, and they acknowledged before me that they, as citizens of such country, owed a great debt to thee and to thine advisor.

“I was grateful to receive an abundance of their precious apples. I was, however, astounded when they offered me another treasure of exceptional value. It was a wooden box, made from the oldest trees of thy kingdom and treated by a village elder of years past. It was said to preserve its contents from ever perishing. In it they placed one apple. The elder there sealed it and told me only the king could open the box, because of the enchantment placed upon it. I left their village with a cartload of apples and this precious box in hand, with the express instructions to deliver the box to thee, O king, that thou should have of the fruit of thy lands for thine own self.”

The advisor paused.

“What of this box?” the king prompted. “I see it not among the gold and silver here before me. I should treasure such a box above all other treasure in this kingdom. Show it to me.”

“I cannot, O great king,” the advisor admitted, lowering his head. “The end of my tale is this,” he said, looking up. “On the sixth day, early in the morning, I set sail with others to return across the great sea. Halfway across, a great storm arose. It shook us at first, then tossed us, then quickly turned into a whirlwind through which the captain and his crew could not safely navigate. We were all of us about to be thrown from the ship when a leviathan rose up out of the sea and broke the ship in two with its great body. On the other side of the ship were the apples, in barrels, and I watched with sorrow as the barrels were wrecked and the apples destroyed in the struggle. I clutched the box that held the king’s apple, but it was to no avail, for amidst the struggle I lost control and it flew straight from my grasp. The leviathan, with its massive body, hit the box into the air high and far, and it landed atop the great mountain, completely and utterly out of reach.”

The king frowned and covered his face.

“Others escaped from the horrible beast and drifted away. I found myself clutching cargo as I escaped, and I drifted for hours toward the other side of the great sea. I was forced to use flotsam as my oar as I paddled toward the shore. I awoke in the nighttime, on the shore, and spotted firelight in the distance. I was fortunate to make camp with a group who let me borrow warmth and a tent.”

The king looked from the advisor to the gold and silver. “What is coin to me when something rarer and more precious than this could be had?”

“Before I came to thee this evening, O great king, I went into the marketplace of this great town. When the people heard my tale and of the risks endured to obtain the apples, they gave freely of their gold and silver. There are three chests beside this one. Each is filled with gold and silver, to overflowing.”

“The people. *My* people. Gave all this and more for the tale of your travels? This is not a great treasure,” the king corrected, “as it is not for my most trusted advisor, but for another advisor who tells a good story to ears that will listen.”

“O king,” the advisor said. “Thy people gave all this and more for thy most trusted advisor, and not for the story. When I told my tale in the marketplace, I told thy people the reason for the great pains taken to acquire the apples, and they gave their gold and silver freely, in reverence for the king’s most trusted advisor. I

could not keep them from giving, for they desired to honor a man whose honor appeared to be worth such a difficult journey.”

The king put his head in hands again.

The advisor bowed his head. “Forgive me, O king, for I determined to find the greatest treasure of this kingdom.” He looked up at the king. “And yet have I returned with a treasure that displeases thee. I fear I do dishonor thy most trusted advisor.”

The king looked up again. “You dishonor neither me nor my most trusted advisor.” The king paused. “But I sorrow that I knew not of these precious apples and that, now knowing, I can neither behold them nor taste them.”

The four advisors lowered their heads.

“The great mountain is treacherous, with all manner of terrible beasts, which we have driven there in times past. I would not worry myself or the kingdom over retrieving the precious box with the precious apple were it not a gift of devotion and rarity.” The king watched his advisors, then sat up in his throne. “We shall mourn the death of my most trusted advisor, sufficient with these riches. Then, you gather my men and we go to the great mountain.”

A few days passed, and the king called his advisors before him again. “We have mourned my most trusted advisor, and he is my most trust advisor no more. How many men have you brought me this day, that we make the journey up the great mountain to find the precious box and its apple?”

The advisors said not a word.

“Have you a hundred men?”

No answer.

“Fifty men, then?”

No answer.

“Have you not ten men ready to fight or die for their king? You may speak freely.”

The fourth advisor stepped forward and bowed. “O great king, who rules over this great kingdom. Thy people are great, and thy knights great indeed. But the great mountain is a place of exile for the most terrible beasts of the land. No man wishes to venture there for no man wishes to endanger this great kingdom or its great king.”

“Am I not the king?” he demanded indignantly. “Do I not speak and my knights obey? Am I so disrespected a king that even my knights will not hear my call? I have been too kind to my people and they have thought me a soft king, but I will show them that I am not.” He rose from his throne.

The fourth advisor bowed his head. “O great king, my lord. No man wishes to venture to the great mountain, but one hundred men certainly will. They would die for thee, if such was needed. But as I am thine advisor, I feel to honor thee I must recommend another way.”

The king sat down.

“Were your men to die attempting to retrieve this precious box, I fear you would lose the love of the people and appear to them a vain man. I went among thy knights and inquired of the task at hand. They express sincere devotion, but they also express worry over their wives and their children—that the men would die and their families be left with nothing but a wooden box in the hands of their king.”

“What do you propose?” the king said.

“Behold the gold and silver, given freely for the funeral of him who was thy most trusted advisor. A fistful of this treasure would feed a family for a year. If you would promise to ensure their families’ wellbeing should they perish on this journey, you would find not one hundred men, but five hundred men—knight or no—willing and ready to brave the great mountain.”

The king pondered this a while. “I desire the gift of this box, but I desire the wellbeing of my people above all. Truly, this is a good saying. Let us gather the first fifty able and willing men—a modest but not insufficient number—and find the precious gift atop the great mountain. Let no man come who does not want to come.”

The advisors gathered men able and willing. Fifty men ascended the great mountain, and forty men returned. The king sorrowed at the loss of ten men for the precious box.

“I am grieved at the loss of ten of my faithful knights,” he declared. “They were not mine advisors, but I regard them as such, for they were noble and serviceable men. We will hold a feast two weeks hence and gather the greatest treasures of this great kingdom, to display at the mourning services.”

The fourth advisor bowed and approached the great king. “O king,” he said, “the greatest treasures of this great kingdom are already here. Were not the apples of great value? But what was given for the apples? Was not the journey to honor thy most trusted advisor of great value? But what was given for the journey? Was not the gold and silver of great value? But what was given for these riches? Were not the lives of these men of great value?”

The king wept.

“But what was given for their lives? The gold and silver were given for their lives, and now they are in the hands of their wives and children. We will bring their wives and children to the mourning services, that they may honor these most noble and devoted men, for truly these were their greatest treasures, and so must they be the greatest treasures of this great kingdom.”

The king raised his head, and he wept no more. Thus, truly, the greatest treasure of the great kingdom was its people. And the king valued their lives above all, all the remainder of his days.

His manager leaned back in her chair, eying the last page of his report. The deep sigh that came from across the desk made him shrink inwardly.

“What do you think?” he blurted out.

The manager looked up, almost as if she had forgotten someone else was in the room, and then set her chair more forward, lowering the pages in her hands a little. She glanced at the man across from her, then back at the pages. She smiled and almost laughed. “It’s...presumptuous, isn’t it? ‘The First Actuary’? I’m not saying you didn’t do something unprecedented, because that’s certainly true....” She trailed off.

He thought for a moment. “No, I think you’re right that the title comes off too strong, now that I’m hearing someone else say it out loud,” he admitted. “Initially I just wanted to emphasize that no one’s gone this far back before.”

“True,” his manager said quickly, “but the board will already know that. And the algorithm is always improving, so someone is bound to find a reason to go back farther than you did. I just think....” She trailed off again, pausing. “Your writing style—while appropriate for the period—is a little presumptuous as well. I wouldn’t want to overstate the significance of what you’ve done, even if it is *very* significant, you know what I mean?”

“I don’t disagree with you,” he said. “But I kind of want to stand by this, precisely *because* it is going to the board. They know it’s significant, we know it’s significant, so I kind of want to get past all that and hand them something more entertaining than what they’re used to getting. I’ll have the full report attached anyway, but we already know they don’t read those in their entirety—”

“But they’ll read this,” his manager interrupted, looking at the pages in her hand again, tapping it with the back of her finger. “You’re right. You’re definitely right.” She sat back further again. “I like it, I honestly do.”

She paused, looking it over again. "If you want to go with it, I'm good with that. As long as we provide the full report and just let them know we wrote up a condensed version in a unique style to appeal to their interests. Or something like that."

"Agreed," he said, grateful to have made the progress he wanted.

"I mean, it's already a captivating story without the narrative you've written." She looked him in the eye. "I wouldn't believe you went through all of that if I hadn't seen the time logs for myself."

He smiled, though part of him—a big part of him—wanted to forget some of what happened. It was life-changing. His restless sleep alone in the week since was a witness to that. "And you're ready with your piece? Anything else you need from me?"

"Nope," she said. "Yep, I have the financials drawn up already. That's what you have going for you more than anything, of course. When you came back, we immediately had over 200,000 more subscribers than we had before you left. I still can't believe I'm saying that."

"The algorithm was right!" he said, grinning.

"The algorithm was right," she agreed. "And since we've confirmed that advisor—you, I guess, while you were there—shows up now in two independent histories, we have even more credibility. And even more of a reason to keep developing the algorithm. Well done," she said, smiling back.

He got up from his chair, gathered his things, and started out.

"Just change the title, okay?" she said, when he got to the door. "It's kind of limiting if our funding continues. We want to assume no limits."

"I'll have it changed before we meet tomorrow," he assured.

"Hey," she said, and looked him in the eye again, leaning on her desk. "I get that some of this is allegorical, but...what about the box? Was there really anything special about it?"

He smiled and shrugged, pulling the door open. "I never saw him open it."

He stepped through and closed the door behind him.