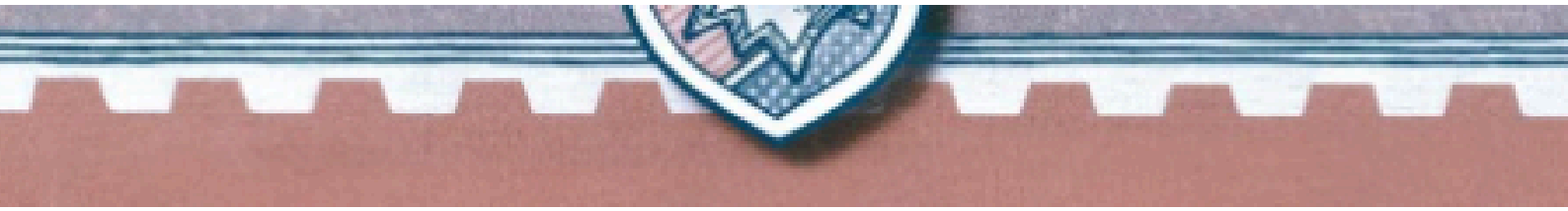
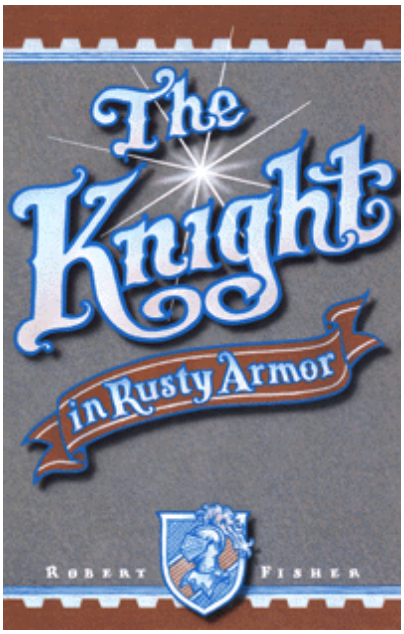
The Knight in Rusty Armor



Robert Fisher





The Knight in Rusty Armor

This is a lighthearted tale of a desperate knight in search of his true self. His journey reflects our own - filled with hope and despair, belief and disillusionment, laughter and tears.

Anyone who has ever struggled with the meaning of life and love will discover profound wisdom and truth as this delightful fantasy unfolds.

The Knight is an experience that will expand your mind, touch your heart, andnourish your soul.

The first chapter sets up the story, and from there, it's hard to stop reading this short story.

"This book is short and simple; I finished it in just 30 minutes. But those 42 pages are amazingly written with hundreds of resourceful inspiration. Superbly crazy." **– Jet Veetlev**

"A must read for glossy wannabees." **– Kei Savourie**

"Another top recommended book after *God's Debris* for those who eager to double, or even triple, their personal glossified quality. A very spiritually transformational work. " **– Lex dePraxis**

"Punchlines! Punchlines! Punchlines!" **– Raytheon**

"It smacked right on my face." **– Ancoll**

"Beyond speechless, a never ending glossification." **– Green**

"This book is fuckingly impressive. I love this book and i read this book twice." **– Sins Aeschylus**

"I know that every man who reads this book will see himself in this book. And I hope that they will pay close attention to this story about a man who learned that he does not have to prove to others that he is good, loving and kind." **– Carmen**

"Certainly, this is written in a most unique form of an easy reading jouney of self-realization that one wants to re-read again and again! The spice of humor interjecting throughout, is perfectly punctuated. Personal insight that the reader gleans from this remarkable format is self-revealing and powerful. You cannot help but recognize yourself and cry, breathe deeply and laugh!" **– Lapson**

"A book written in the simple language of the wise. No need for grandiose words. But it will go direct to the heart of those who are seeking higher meaning in life. Answers to our loneliness, anguish and fears. If one is daring enough will pick up the challenge: tear down your armour and be yourself, then you will love and receive love. Great reading material for teens who try to be part of the crowd.Great for all ages!" **– Cusso**



Chapter 1
The Knight's Dilemma

Once a long time ago, in a land far away, there lived a knight who thought of himself as good, kind, and loving. He did all the things that good, kind and loving knights do. He fought foes who were bad, mean and hateful. He slew dragons and rescued fair damsels in distress. When the knight business was slow, he had the annoying habit of rescuing damsels even if they did not want to be rescued, so, although many ladies were grateful to him, just as many were furious with him. This he accepted philosophically. After all, one can't please everybody.

This knight was famous for his armor. It reflected such bright rays of light that villagers would swear they had seen the sun rise in the north or set in the east when the knight rode off to battle. And he rode off to battle frequently. At the mere mention of a crusade, the knight would eagerly don his shining armor, mount his horse, and ride off in any direction. So eager was he, in fact, that sometimes he would ride off in several directions at once, which was no easy feat.

For years this knight strove to be the number one knight in all the kingdom. There was always another battle to be won, dragon to be slain, or damsel to be rescued.

The knight had a faithful and somewhat tolerant wife, Juliet, who wrote beautiful poetry, said clever things, and had a penchant for wine. He also had a young, golden-haired son, Christopher, who he hoped would grow up to be a courageous knight.

Juliet and Christopher saw little of the knight, because when not fighting battles, slaying dragons, and rescuing damsels, he was occupied with trying on his armor and admiring its brilliance. As time went on, the knight became so enamored of his armor that he began wearing it to dinner and often to bed. After a time, he didn't bother to take it off at all. Gradually his family forgot how he looked without it. Occasionally, Christopher would ask his mother what his father looked like. When this happened, Juliet would lead the boy to the fireplace and point above it to a portait of the knight. "There's your father," she would sigh.

One afternoon, while contemplating the portait, Christopher said to his mother, "I wish I could see Father in person."

"You can't have everything!" snapped Juliet. She was growing impatient with having only a painting to remind her of her husband's face, and she was tired from having her sleep distrubed by the clanking of armor.

When he was at home and not completely preoccupied with his armor, the knight usually delivered monologues on his exploits. Juliet and Christopher were seldom able to get a word in edgewise. When they did, the knight shut it out either by closing his visor or by abruptly going to sleep.



One day, Juliet confronted her husband. "I think you love your armor more than you love me."

"That's not true," answered the knight. "Didn't I love you enough to rescue you from that dragon and set you up in this classy castle with wall-to-wall stones?"

"What you loved," said Juliet, peering through his visor so that she could see his eyes, "was the idea of rescuing me. You didn't really love me then, and you don't really love me now."

"I do love you," insisted the knight, hugging her clumsily in his cold, stiff armor and nearly breaking her ribs.

"Then take off that armor so that I can see who you really are!" she demanded.

"I can't take it off. I have to be ready to mount my horse and ride off in any direction," explained the knight.

"If you don't take off that armor, I'm taking Christopher, getting on my horse, and riding out of your life."

Well, this was a real blow to the knight. He didn't want Juliet to leave. He loved his wife and his son and his classy castle, but he also loved his armor because it showed everyone who he was - a good, kind, and loving knight. Why didn't Juliet realize that he was any of these things?

The knight was in turmoil. Finally he came to a decision. continuing to wear the armor wasn't worth losing Juliet and Christopher.

Reluctantly, the knight reached up to remove his helmet, but it didn't budge! He pulled harder. It held fast. Dismayed, he tried lifting his visor but, alas, that was stuck, too. Though he tugged on the visor again and again, nothing happened.

The knight paced back and forth in great agitation. How could this have happened? Perhaps it was not so surprising to find the helmet stuck since he had not removed it for years, but the visor was another matter. He had opened it regularly to eat and drink. Why, he had lifted it just that morning over a breakfast of scrambled eggs and suckling pig.

Suddenly the knight had an idea. Without saying where he was going, he hurried to the blacksmith's shop in the castle courtyard. When he arrived, the smith was shaping a horseshoe with his bare hands.

"Smith," said the knight, "I have a problem."

"You are a problem, sire," quipped the smith with his usual tact.



The knight, who normally enjoyed bantering, glowered. "I'm in no mood for your wisecracks right now. I'm stuck in this armor," he bellowed as he stamped his steel-clad foot, accidentally bringing it down on the smith's big toe.

The smith let out a howl and, momentarily forgetting the knight was his master, dealt him a smashing blow to the helmet. The knight felt only a twinge of discomfort. The helmet didn't budge.

"Try again," ordered the knight, unaware that the smith obliged out of anger.

"With pleasure," the smith agreed, swinging a nearby hammer with vengeance and bringing it down squarely on the knight's helmet. The blow didn't even make a dent.

The knight was distraught. The smith was by far the strongest man in the kingdom. If he couldn't shuck the knight out of his armor, who could?

Being a kind man, except when his big toe was crushed, the smith sensed the knight's panic and grew sympathetic. "You have a tough plight, Knight, but don't give up. Come back tomorrow after I'm rested. You caught me at the end of a hard day."

Dinner time that evening was difficult. Juliet became increasingly annoyed as she pushed bits of food she had mashed through the holes in the knight's visor. Partway through the meal, the knight told Juliet that the blacksmith had tried to split open the armor but had failed.

"I don't believe you, you clanking clod!" she shouted, as she smashed her half-full plate of pigeon stew on his helmet.

The knight felt nothing. Only when gravy began dripping down past the eyeholes in his visor did he realize that he'd been hit on the head. He had barely felt the smith's hammer that afternoon either. In fact, when he thought about it, his armor kept him from feeling much of anything, and he had worn it for so long now that he'd forgotten how things felt without it.

The knight was upset that Juliet didn't believe he was trying to get his armor off. He and the smith had tried, and they kept at it for many more days without success. Each day the knight grew more despondent and Juliet grew colder.

Finally, the knight had to admit that the smith's efforts were useless. "Strongest man in the kingdom, indeed! You can't even break open this steel junkyard!" the knight yelled in frustration.

When the knight returned home, Juliet shrieked at him, "Your son has nothing but a portrait for a father, and I'm tired of talking to a closed visor. I'm never pushing food through the holes of that wretched thing again. I've mashed my very last mutton chop!"

"It's not my fault that I got stuck in this armor. I had to wear it so that I would always be ready for battle. How else could I get nice castles and horses for you and Christopher?"



"You didn't do it for us," argued Juliet. "You did it for yourself!"

The knight was sick at heart that his wife didn't seem to love him anymore. He also feared that if he didn't get his armor off soon, Juliet and Christopher would really leave. He had to get the armor off, but he didn't know how to do it.

The knight dismissed one idea after another as being unlikely to work. Some of the plans were downright dangerous. He knew that any knight who would even think of melting his armor off with a castle torch, freezing it off by jumping into an icy moat, or blasting it off with a cannon was badly in need of help. Unable to find aid in his own kingdom, the knight decided to search in other lands. Somewhere there must be someone who can help me get this armor off, he thought.

Of course, he would miss Juliet, Christopher, and his classy castle. He also feared that in his absence Juliet might find love with another knight, one willing to remove his armor at bedtime and to be more of a father to Christopher. Nevertheless, the knight had to go, so, early one morning, he got onto his horse, and he rode away. He didn't dare look back for fear he might change his mind.

On his way out of the province, the knight stopped to say goodbye to the king, who had been very good to him. The king lived in a grand castle atop a hill in the high-rent district. As the knight rode across the drawbridge and into the courtyard, he saw the court jester sitting cross-legged, playing a reed flute.

The jester was called Gladbag because, over his shoulder, he carried a beautiful rainbow-colored bag filled with all sorts of things that made people laugh or smile. There were strange cards that he used to tell people's fortunes, brightly colored beads that he made appear and disappear, and funny little puppets that he used to amusingly insult his audiences.

"Hi, Gladbag," said the knight. "I came to say farewell to the king."

The jester looked up.

"The king has up and gone away, To you there's nothing he can say."

"Where has he gone?" asked the knight.

"He's taken off on a new crusade. If you wait for him, you'll be delayed."

The knight was disappointed that he had missed the king and perturbed that he couldn't join him on the crusade. "Oh," he sighed, "I could starve to death in this armor by the time the king returns. I might never see him again." The knight felt very much like slumping in his saddle, but, of course, his armor wouldn't let him.

"Well, aren't you a silly sight? All your might can't solve your plight."



"I'm in no mood for your insulting rhymes," barked the knight, stiffening in his armor. "Can't you take someone's problem seriously for once?"

In a clear, lyrical voice, Gladbag sang:

"Problems never set me a-rockin'. They're opportunities a-knockin'"

"You'd sing a different tune if you were the one stuck in here," growled the knight.

Gladbag retorted:

"We're all stuck in armor of a kind. Yours is merely easier to find."

"I don't have time to stay and listen to your nonsense. I have to find a way to get out of this armor." With that, the knight kneed his mount forward to leave, but Gladbag called after him:

"There is one who can help you, knight, to bring the real you into sight."

The knight pulled his horse to a stop and, excitedly, he turned back to Gladbag. "You know someone who can get me out of this armor? Who is it?"

"Merlin the Magician you must see. Then you'll discover how to be free."

"Merlin? The only Merlin I've ever heard of is the great and wise teacher of King Arthur."

"Yes, yes, that's his claim to fame. This Merlin I know is one and the same."

"But that can't be!" exclaimed the knight. "Merlin and Arthur lived long ago."

Gladbag replied. "It's true, yet he's alive and well. In yonder woods the sage doth dwell."

"But those woods are so big," said the knight. "How will I find him in there?"

Gladbag smiled and said, "One never knows be it days, weeks, or years, when the pupil is ready, the teacher appears."

"I can't wait for Merlin to show up. I'm going to look for him," said the knight. He reached out and shook Gladbag's hand in gratitude, nearly crushing the jester's fingers with his gauntlet.

Gladbad yelped. The knight quickly released the jester's hand. "Sorry." Gladbag rubbed his bruised fingers.

"When the armor's gone from you, you'll feel the pain of others, too."

"I'm off!" said the knight. He wheeled his horse around, and with new hope in his heart, galloped away to find Merlin.



Chapter 2
In Merlin's Woods

It was no easy task to find the wily wizard. There were many woods to search but only one Merlin. So the poor knight rode on, day after day, night after night, becoming weaker and weaker.

As he rode through the woods alone, the knight realized there were many things he didn't know. He'd always thought of himself as very smart, but he didn't feel very smart at all trying to survive in the woods.

Reluctantly he admitted to himself that he didn't even know the poisonous berries from the edible ones. This made eating a game of Russian roulette. Drinking was no less hazardous. The knight tried sticking his head into a stream, but his helmet filled up with water. Twice, he almost drowned. As if that weren't bad enough, he had been lost since entering the woods. The knight couldn't tell north from south or east from west. Fortunately, his horse could.

After months of searching in vain, the knight was quite discouraged. He still hadn't found Merlin even though he'd traveled many leagues. What made him feel worse was the fact that he didn't even know how far a league was.

One morning, he woke up feeling weaker than usual and a little peculiar. That was the morning he found Merlin. The knight recognized the magician at once. He was sitting under a tree, clothed in a long white robe. Animals of the forest were gathered around him, and birds were perched on his shoulders and arms.

The knight shook his head glumly from side to side, his armor squeaking as he did. How could all these animals find Merlin so easily when it was so hard for me?

Wearily, the knight climbed down from his horse. "I've been looking for you," he said to the magician. "I've been lost for months."

"All your life," corrected Merlin, biting off a piece of carrot and sharing it with the nearest rabbit.

The knight stiffened. "I didn't come all this way to be insulted."

"Perhaps you have always taken the truth to be an insult," said Merlin, sharing the carrot with some of the other animals.

The knight didn't much like this remark either, but he was too weak from hunger and thirst to climb back on his horse and ride away. Instead, he dropped his metal-encased body onto the grass. Merlin looked at him compassionately. "You are most fortunate," he commented. "You are too weak to run."



"What does that mean?" snapped the knight.

Merlin smiled in reply. "A person cannot run and also learn. He must stay in one place for a while."

"I'm going to stay only long enough to learn how to get out of this armor," said the knight.

"When you learn that," stated Merlin, "you will never again have to climb on your horse and ride off in all directions."

The knight was too tired to question this. Somehow, he felt comforted and fell promptly asleep.

When the knight awakened, he saw Merlin and the animals all around him. He tried to sit up, but he was too weak. Merlin held out a silver cup with a strange-colored liquid in it. "Drink this," he ordered.

"What is it?" asked the knight, eyeing the cup suspiciously.

"You are so afraid," said Merlin. "Of course, that is why you put on the armor in the first place."

The knight didn't bother to deny this, for he was too thirsty.

"All right, I'll drink it. Pour it into my visor."

"I will not," Merlin said. "It is too precious to waste." He plucked a reed, put one end in the cup, and slipped the other into one of the holes in the knight's visor.

"This is a great idea!" said the knight.

"I call it a straw," replied Merlin.

"Why?"

"Why not?"

The knight shrugged and sipped the liquid through the reed. The first sips seemed bitter, the later ones more pleasant, and the last swallows quite delicious. Grateful, the knight handed the cup back to Merlin. "You should put that stuff on the market. You could sell flagons of it."

Merlin just smiled.

"What is it?" asked the knight.

"Life," Merlin replied.



"Life?"

"Yes," said the wise magician. "Did it not first seem bitter, then as you tasted more of it, was it not pleasant?"

The knight nodded. "Yes, and the last swallows were quite delicious."

"That was when you began to accept what you were drinking."

"Are you saying that life is good when you accept it?" asked the knight.

"Is it not?" replied Merlin, raising an eyebrow in amusement.

"Do you expect me to accept all this heavy armor?"

"Ah," said Merlin, "you were not born with that armor. You put it on yourself. Have you ever asked yourself why?"

"Why not?" retorted the knight irritably. At this point, his head was beginning to hurt. He wasn't used to thinking in this manner.

"You will be able to think more clearly when you regain your strength," Merlin said.

With that, the magician clapped his hands, and the squirrels, holding nuts in their little mouths, lined up in front of the knight. Each squirrel climbed up onto the knight's shoulder, cracked and chewed a nut, then pushed the pieces through the knight's visor.

The rabbits did the same thing with carrots, and the deer crushed roots and berries for the knight to eat. This method of feeding would never be endorsed by the health department, but what else could a knight who was stuck in his armor in the woods possibly do?

The animals fed the knight regularly, and Merlin gave him large cups of Life to drink through the straw. Slowly the knight grew stronger, and he began to feel more hopeful.

Each day, he asked Merlin the same question: "When will I get out of this armor?" Each day, Merlin replied, "Patience! You have been wearing that armor for a long time. You cannot get out of it just like that."

One night, the animals and the knight were listening to the magician play the latest troubadour hits on his lute. Waiting until Merlin had finished playing "Hark Ye the Days of Old, When Knights Were Bold and Maidens Were Cold," the knight asked a question long on his mind. "Were you really the teacher of King Arthur?"

The magician's face lit up. "Yes, I taught Arthur," he said.

"But how can you still be alive? Arthur lived eons ago!" exclaimed the knight.



"Past, present, and future are all one when you are connected to the Source," replied Merlin.

"What is the Source?" asked the knight.

"It is the mysterious, invisible power that is the origin of all."

"I don't understand," said the knight.

"That is because you are trying to understand with your mind, but your mind is limited."

"I have a very good mind," argued the knight.

"And a clever one," added Merlin. "It trapped you in all that armor."

The knight could not refute this. Then he remembered something that Merlin had said to him when he first arrived. "You once said that I put on this armor because I was afraid."

"Is that not true?" responded Merlin.

"No, I wore it for protection when I went to battle."

"And you were afraid you would be seriously hurt or killed," added Merlin.

"Isn't everybody?"

Merlin shook his head. "Who ever said you had to go to battle?"

"I had to prove that I was a good, kind, and loving knight."

"If you really were good, kind, and loving, why did you have to prove it?" Merlin asked.

The knight escaped thinking about this in his usual manner of escaping things – he drifted off to sleep.

The following morning, he awakened with an odd thought stuck in his mind: Was it possible that he was not good, kind, and loving? He decided to ask Merlin.

"What do you think?" Merlin replied.

"Why do you always answer a question with another question?"

"And why do you always seek the answers to your questions from others?"

The knight stomped off angrily, cursing Merlin under his breath. "That Merlin!" he muttered. "Sometimes he really gets under my armor!"



With a thud, the knight plunked his burdened body down under a tree to comtemplate the magician's questions.

What did he think? "Could it be," he said aloud to no one in particular, "that I'm not good, kind, and loving?"

"Could be," said a little voice. "Otherwise, why are you sitting on my tail?"

"Huh?" The knight peered down to the side and noticed a little squirrel sitting beside him. That is, he could see most of the squirrel. Her tail was hidden from sight.

"Oh, excuse me!" said the knight, quickly moving his leg so that the squirrel could reclaim her tail. "I hope I didn't hurt you. I can't see very well with this visor in my way."

"I don't doubt that," replied the squirrel without any resentment in her voice.

"That's why you have to keep apologizing to people for hurting them."

"The only thing that irritates me more than a smart-aleck magician is a smart-aleck squirrel," groused the knight. "I don't have to stay here and talk to you."

He labored against the armor's weight in an attempt to get to his feet. Suddenly, in amazement, he blurted out, "Hey ... you and I are talking!"

"A tribute to my good nature," replied the squirrel, "considering that you sat on my tail."

"But animals can't talk," said the knight.

"Oh, sure we can," said the squirrel. "It's just that people don't listen."

The knight shook his head in bewilderment. "You've talked to me before?"

"Certainly, every time I cracked a nut and pushed it through your visor."

"How can I hear you now when I couldn't hear you then?"

"I admire an inquiring mind," commented the squirrel, "but don't you ever accept anything the way it is - just because it is?"

"You're answering my questions with questions," said the knight. "You've been around Merlin too long."

"And you haven't been around him long enough!"

The squirrel flicked her tail at the knight and ran up a tree. The knight called after her. "Wait! What's your name?"



"Squirrel", she replied very simply and vanished into the topmost branches.

Dazed, the knight shook his head. Had he imagined this? At that moment, he saw Merlin approaching. "Merlin," he said, "I have to get out of here. I've started talking to squirrels."

"Splendid," replied the magician.

The knight looked troubled. "What do you mean, splendid?"

"Just that. You are becoming sensitive enough to feel the vibrations of others.

The knight was obviously confused, so Merlin continued explaining. "You did not talk to the squirrel in words, but you felt her vibrations, and you translated those vibrations into words. I am looking forward to the day when you start talking to flowers."

"That'll be the day you plant them on my grave. I have to get out of these woods!"

"Where would you go?"

"Back to Juliet and Christopher. They've been alone for too long. I have to get back and take care of them."

"How can you take care of them when you cannot even take care of yourself?" Merlin asked.

"But I miss them," whined the knight. "I want to go back to them in the worst way."

"And that is exactly how you will be going back if you go in your Armor," cautioned Merlin.

The knight looked at Merlin sadly, "I don't want to wait until I get the armor off. I want to go back now and be a good, kind, and loving husband to Juliet and a great father to Christopher."

Merlin nodded in understanding. He told the knight that going back to give of himself was a lovely gift. "However, a gift, to be a gift, has to be accepted. Otherwise it lies like a burden between people."

"You mean they might not want me back?" asked the knight in surprise. "Surely they would give me another chance. After all, I am one of the top knights in the kingdom."

"Perhaps that armor is thicker than it appears," Merlin said gently.

The knight thought about this. He remembered Juliet's endless complaints about his going off to battle so often, about the attention he showered on his armor, and about his closed visor and his habit of abruptly going to sleep to shut out her words. Maybe Juliet wouldn't want him back, but certainly Christopher would.

"Why not send Christopher a note and ask him?" suggested Merlin.



The knight agreed that this was a good idea, but how could he get the note to Christopher? Merlin pointed to the pigeon sitting on his shoulder. "Rebecca will take it."

The knight was puzzled. "She doesn't know where I live. She's only a stupid bird."

"I can tell north from south and east from west," snapped Rebecca, "which is more than I can say for you."

The knight quickly apologized. He was thoroughly shaken. Not only had he talked to both a pigeon and a squirrel, but he'd gotten both of them mad at him in the same day.

Bighearted bird that she was, Rebecca accepted the knight's apology and flew off with his hastily written note to Christopher in her beak.

"Don't coo at any strange pigeons, or you'll drop my note," the knight called after her.

Rebecca ignored his thoughtless remark, realizing that the knight had much to learn.

A week passed, and Rebecca still had not returned. The knight became more and more anxious, fearing she might have fallen prey to one of the hunting falcons he and the other knights had trained. He winced, wondering how he could have participated in such a foul sport - then winced again at his awful pun.

When Merlin finished playing his lute and singing "You'll Have a Long, Cold Winter if You Have a Short, Cold Heart," the knight expressed his worries about Rebecca.

Merlin reassured the knight by making up a happy little verse: "The smartest pigeon who ever flew, will never wind up in someone's stew."

All at once, a great chattering arose from the animals. They were all looking skyward, so Merlin and the knight looked, too. High above them, circling for a landing, they saw Rebecca.

The knight struggled to his feet just as Rebecca swooped down onto Merlin's shoulder. Taking the note from her beak, the magician glanced at it and gravely told the knight it was from Christopher.

"Let me see!" said the knight, eagerly seizing the paper. His jaw dropped with a clank as he stared at the note in disbelief. "It's blank!" he exclaimed. "What does that mean?"

"It means," said Merlin softly, "that your son does not know enough about you to give you an answer."

The knight stood there for a moment, stunned, then groaned and slowly sank to the ground. He tried to choke back the tears, for knights in shining armor simply didn't cry. However, his grief soon overwhelmed him. Then, exhausted and half-drowned from the tears in his helmet, the knight fell asleep.



Chapter 3
The Path of Truth

When the knight awoke, Merlin was sitting quietly beside him. "I'm sorry I acted so unknightly," said the knight. "My beard got all soggy," he added in disgust.

"Do not apologize," said Merlin. "You have just taken the first step toward getting out of your armor."

"What do you mean?"

"You will see," replied the magician. He stood up. "It is time for you to go."

This disturbed the knight. He had come to enjoy staying in the woods with Merlin and the animals. Anyway it seemed he had no place to go. Juliet and Christopher apparently didn't want him to come home. True, he could get back into the knight business and go on some crusades. He had a good reputation in battle, and there were several kings who would be happy to have him, but fighting no longer seemed to have any purpose.

Merlin reminded the knight of his new purpose: to get rid of his armor.

"Why bother?" asked the knight morosely. "It doesn't matter to Juliet and Christopher whether I get my armor off or not."

"Do it for yourself," suggested Merlin. "Being trapped in all that steel has caused you a lot of problems, and things will only get worse as time goes on. You could even die of something like catching pneumonia from a soggy beard."

"I suppose my armor has become a nuisance." replied the knight. "I'm tired of lugging it around, and I'm fed up with eating mushy food. Come to think of it, I can't even scratch my back when it itches."

"And how long has it been since you have felt the warmth of a kiss, smelled the fragrance of a flower, or heard a beautiful melody without your armor getting in the way?"

"I can hardly remember," mumbled the knight sadly. "You're right, Merlin. I have to get this armor off for myself."

"You cannot continue living and thinking as you have in the past," said Merlin. "That is how you got stuck in your steel prison in the first place."

"But how am I ever going to change all that?" asked the knight uneasily.

"It is not as difficult as it may seem," Merlin explained, leading the knight to a path. "This was the path you followed to get into these woods."



"I didn't follow any path," said the knight. "I was lost for months!"

"People are often unaware of the path they are on," replied Merlin.

"You mean this path was here, but I couldn't see it?"

"Yes, and you can go back that way if you want, but it leads to dishonesty, greed, hatred, jealousy, fear, and ignorance."

"Are you saying that I am all those things?" the knight asked indignantly.

"At times, you are some of those things," Merlin admitted quietly.

The magician then pointed to another path. It was narrower than the first and very steep.

"That looks like a tough climb," observed the knight.

Merlin nodded in agreement. "That," he said, "is the Path of Truth. It gets steeper as it approaches the summit of a mountain far in the distance."

The knight looked at the steep trail without enthusiasm. "I'm not sure it's worth it. What will I have when I get to the top?"

"It is what you won't have," Merlin explained - "your armor!" The knight pondered this. If he returned to the path that he had traveled before, there was no hope of removing his armor, and he would probably die of loneliness and fatigue.

The only way to get the armor off, it seemed, was to follow the Path of Truth, but then he might die trying to struggle up the steep mountainside.

The knight looked at the difficult path ahead. Then he looked down at the steel covering his body.

"OK," he said with resignation. "I'll try the Path of Truth."

Merlin nodded. "Your decision to take an unknown trail while encumbered with heavy armor takes courage."

The knight knew that he'd better start immediately, or he might change his mind. "I'll get my trusty horse," he said.

"Oh, no," said Merlin, shaking his head. "The path has areas too narrow for a horse to pass. You will have to go on foot."

Aghast, the knight plunked down on a rock. "I think I'd rather die of a soggy beard," he said, his courage waning rapidly.



"You will not have to travel alone," Merlin told him. "Squirrel will accompany you."

"What do you expect me to do, ride squirrel-back?" asked the knight, dreading the thought of making the arduous journey with a smart-talking animal.

"You might not be able to ride me," said Squirrel, "but you'll need me to help you eat. Who else is going to chew nuts for you and push them through your visor?"

Rebecca flew over from a nearby tree, where she'd heard the conversation, and landed on the knight's shoulder. "I'll go with you, too. I've been to the top of the mountain, and I know the way," she said.

The willingness of the two animals to help gave the knight the courage he needed.

Well, isn't this something, he said to himself, one of the top knights in the kingdom needing courage from a squirrel and a bird! He struggled to his feet, signaling to Merlin that he was ready to begin his journey.

As they walked toward the path, the magician took an exqusite golden key from his neck and gave it to the knight. "This key will open the doors to three castles that will block your path."

"I know!" cried the knight eagerly. "There will be a princess inside each castle, and I'll slay the dragon guarding her and rescue -"

"Enough!" Merlin broke in. "There will be no princesses in any of these castles. Even if there were, you are in no shape just now to be rescuing anyone. You have to learn to save yourself first."

Thus reprimanded, the knight grew quiet while Merlin continued. "The first castle is named Silence; the second, Knowledge; and the third, Will and Daring. Once you enter them, you will find your way out only after you have learned what you are there to learn."

From the knight's point of view, this didn't sound like nearly as much fun as rescuing princesses. Besides, at the moment, castle tours didn't really appeal to him. "Why can't I just go around the castles?" he asked sulkily.

"If you do, you'll stray from the path, and you are certain to get lost. The only way you can get to the top of the mountain is to go through those castles," Merlin said firmly.

The knight sighed deeply as he gazed up the steep, narrow trail. It disappeared between tall trees that jutted up toward some low-hanging clouds. He sensed that this journey was going to be much more difficult than a crusade.

Merlin knew what the knight was thinking. "Yes," he agreed, "there is a different battle to be fought on the Path of Truth. The fight will be learning to love yourself."

"How will I do that?" asked the knight.



"It will begin with learning to know yourself," answered Merlin. "This battle cannot be won with your sword, so you can leave it here." Merlin's gentle gaze rested on the knight for a moment. Then he added, "If you encounter anything you cannot handle, just call me and I will come."

"You mean you can appear anywhere I happen to be?"

"Any self-respecting magician can do that," Merlin replied. Then he disappeared.

The knight was astounded. "Why ... why, he vanished!"

Squirrel nodded. "He really hams it up sometimes."

"You're going to waste all your energy talking," Rebecca scolded. "Let's get going."

The knight's helmet squeaked as he shook his head in assent. They started out with Squirrel in the lead, then the knight with Rebecca on his shoulder. From time to time, Rebecca flew on scouting missions and returned to report what lay ahead.

After a few hours, the knight collapsed, exhausted and sore. He was not used to traveling in armor without his horse. Since it was almost dark anyway, Rebecca and Squirrel decided that they might as well stop there for the night.

Rebecca flew among the bushes and returned with some berries, which she pushed through the holes in the knight's visor. Squirrel went to a nearby brook and filled some walnut shells with water, which the knight drank through the straw that Merlin had given him. Too tired to stay awake for the nuts Squirrel was preparing next, the knight fell asleep.

He was awakened the next morning by the sun shining in his eyes. Unaccustomed to the glare, he squinted. His visor had never before allowed in so much light. As he was trying to figure out this phenomenon, he became aware that Squirrel and Rebecca were looking at him, excitedly chattering and cooing. Pushing himself to a sitting position, he suddenly realized that he could see more than he had the day before, and he could feel the cool air against his face. Part of his visor had broken off and fallen away! How did that happen? he wondered.

Squirrel answered his unspoken question. "It rusted and fell off."

"But how?" asked the knight.

"From the tears you cried after you saw your son's blank letter," said Rebecca.

The knight considered this. The sorrow he had felt was so deep that his armor could not protect him from it. Quite to the contrary, his tears had started to break down the steel surrounding him.

"That's it!" he shouted. "Tears from real feelings will release me from my armor!"



He climbed to his feet faster than he had done in years. "Squirrel! Rebecca!" he cried. "Forsooth! Let's hit the Path of Truth!"

Rebecca and Squirrel were so overjoyed at what was happening to the knight that neither of them even mentioned that this was terible rhyming.

The three of them continued on up the mountain. It was an especially fine day for the knight. He noticed tiny sunlit particles in the air as they filtered through the branches of the trees. He looked closely at the faces of some robins and and saw that they didn't all look alike. He mentioned this to Rebecca who hopped up and down, cooing merrily. "You're starting to see the differences in other forms of life because you're starting to see the differences within yourself."

The knight tried to figure out exactly what Rebecca meant. He was too proud to ask, for he still thought a knight should be smarter than a pigeon.

Just then Squirrel, who had gone scouting ahead, came scampering back. "The Castle of Silence is just over the next rise."

Excited at the thought of seeing the castle, the knight clanked forward even faster. He reached the top of the hill quite out of breath. Sure enough, a castle loomed ahead, completely blocking the path. The knight confessed to Squirrel and Rebecca that he was disappointed. He had expected a very fancy structure. Instead, the Castle of Silence looked just like any other tract castle.

Rebecca laughed and said, "When you learn to accept instead of expect, you'll have fewer disappointment."

The knight nodded at the wisdom of this. "I've spent most of my life being disappointed. I remember lying in my crib, thinking I was the most beautiful baby in the whole world. Then my nurse looked down at me and said, 'You have a face only a mother could love.' I wound up being disappointed in myself for being ugly instead of beautiful, and I was disappointed in the nurse for being so impolite."

"If you had truly accepted yourself as beautiful, it wouldn't have mattered what she said. You wouldn't have been disappointed," Squirrel explained.

This made sense to the knight. "I'm beginning to think that animals are smarter than people."

"The fact that you can say that makes you as smart as we are," Squirrel replied.

"I don't think it has anything to do with being smart," said Rebecca. "Animals accept and humans expect. You'll never hear a rabbit say, 'I expect the sun to come out this morning so I can go down to the lake and play.' If the sun doesn't come out, it won't ruin the rabbit's whole day. He's happy just being a rabbit."



The knight mulled this over. He couldn't recall many people who were happy just being people.

Soon they came to the door of the huge castle. The knight took the golden key from his neck and fitted it into the lock. As he opened the door, Rebecca whispered, "We're not going in with you."

The knight, who was learning to love and trust the two animals, was disappointed that they would not accompany him. He almost said so, but he caught himself. He was expecting again.

The animals knew that the knight was hesitant to step into the castle. "We can show you the door," said Squirrel, "but you have to walk through it alone."

As Rebecca flew off, she called cheerily, "We'll meet you on the other side."



Chapter 4
The Castle of Silence

Left on his own, the knight cautiously poked his head inside the doorway of the castle. His knees trembled slightly, which, with his armor, caused him to make a low metallic rattle. Not wanting to look chicken to a pigeon in case Rebecca could still see him, he pulled himself together and walked boldly inside, closing the door after him.

For a moment, he wished he hadn't left his sword behind, but Merlin had promised that there'd be no dragons to slay, and the knight trusted him.

He walked into the huge anteroom of the castle and he looked around. He saw only a fire blazing in an enormous stone fireplace on one wall and three rugs on the floor. He sat down on the rug nearest the fire.

The knight soon became aware of two things: First there seemed to be no door leading out of the room to other parts of the castle. Second, there was an extraordinary, eerie silence in this castle. He realized with a start that the fire wasn't even crackling. The knight had thought of his own castle as quiet, especially at those times when Juliet didn't talk to him for several days, but it was nothing like this. The Castle of Silence is well named, he thought. Never in his life had he felt so alone.

Suddenly, the knight was startled by the sound of a familiar voice behind him.

"Hello, Knight."

The knight turned and was astonished to see the king approaching him from a far corner of the room.

"King!" he gasped. "I didn't even see you. What are you doing here?"

"The same thing you are, Knight - looking for the door."

"One can't really see until one understands," said the king. "When you understand what's in this room, you'll be able to see the door to the next."

"I certainly hope so, King," said the knight. "I'm surprised to see you here. I heard you were on a crusade."

"That's the word I give out whenever I travel the Path of Truth," the king explained. "It's easier for my subjects to understand."

The knight looked puzzled.

"Everybody understands crusades," said the king, "but very few understand truth."



"Yes," agreed the knight. "I wouldn't be on this path myself if I weren't trapped in this armor."

"Most of us are trapped inside our armor," declared the king.

"What do you mean?" asked the knight.

"We set up barriers to protect who we think we are. Then one day we get stuck behind the barriers, and we can't get out."

"I never thought of you as being stuck, King. You're so wise," said the knight.

The king laughed ruefully. "I have enough wisdom to know when I'm stuck and to return here so that I can learn more about myself."

The knight was greatly encouraged, thinking that perhaps the king could show him the way. "Say," said the knight, his face brightening, "could we go through the castle together? That way we wouldn't be so lonely."

The king shook his head. "I once tried that. It's true that my companions and I weren't so lonely because we talked constantly, but when one talks, it's impossible to see the door out of this room."

"Maybe we could just walk along and be quiet together," suggested the knight. He wasn't looking forward to wandering around the Castle of Silence by himself.

The king shook his head again, harder this time. "No, I tried that, too. It made the emptiness less painful, but I still couldn't see the door out of this room."

The knight protested. "But if you weren't talking ..."

"Being quiet is more than not talking," said the king. "I discovered that when I was with someone, I showed only my best image. I wouldn't let down my barriers and allow either myself or the other person to see what I was trying to hide."

"I don't get it," said the knight.

"You will," replied the king, "when you have been here long enough. One must be alone to drop one's armor."

The knight was dismayed. "I don't want to stay here by myself!" he exclaimed, stamping his foot emphatically and inadvertently bringing it down on the king's big toe.

The king yelled in pain and hopped around.

The knight was horrified! First the smith; now the king. "Sorry, sire," said the knight apologetically.



The king rubbed his toe tenderly. "Oh, well. That armor hurts you more than it hurts me." Then, standing tall, he looked knowingly at the knight. "I understand that you don't want to stay in this castle by yourself. Neither did I when I first began coming here, but now I realize that what one must do here, one must do alone." With that, he limped across the room, adding, "I must be on my way now."

Perplexed, the knight asked, "Where are you going? The door is over here."

"That door is only an entrance. The door to the next room is on the far wall. I finally saw it just as you came in," said the king.

"What do you mean finally saw it? Didn't you remember where it was from the other times you were here?" asked the knight, wondering why the king would bother to keep coming back.

"One never finishes traveling the Path of Truth. Each time I come here, I find new doors as I understand more and more." The king waved. "Be good to yourself, my friend."

"Wait! Please!" called the knight.

The king looked back at him compassionately. "Yes?"

The knight knew well that he couldn't shake the king's resolve. "Is there any advice you can give me before you go?"

The king thought for a moment then replied, "This is a new kind of crusade for you, dear Knight - one that requires more courage than all the other battles you've known before. It will be your greatest victory if you can summon the strength to stay and do what you need to do here."

With this, the king turned, reached out as if to open a door, then disappeared into the wall, leaving the knight staring disbelievingly after him.

The knight hurried over to where the king had been, hoping that from up close, he might be able to see the door, too. Finding what appeared to be only a solid wall, he began to pace around the room. All the knight could hear was the sound of his armor echoing through the castle.

After awhile, he felt more depressed than ever in his life. To cheer himself up, he sang a couple of rousing battle songs: "I'll Be Down to Get You in a Crusade, Honey" and "Anywhere I Hang My Helmet is Home." He sang them over and over again.

As his voice grew tired, the stillness began to drown out his singing, enveloping him in utter, devastating quiet. Only then could the knight frankly admit something he'd never acknowledged before: He was afraid to be alone.



At that moment, he saw a door in the far wall of the room. He crossed over to it, slowly pulled it open, and stepped into another room. This chamber appeared very much like the last, except it was somewhat smaller. It, too, was void of all sound.

In order to pass the time, the knight began talking aloud to himself. He said anything that came into his mind. He talked about what he was like as a little boy and how he was different from the other boys he knew. While they hunted quail and played "Pin the Tail on the Boar," he sat inside and read. Since books were handwritten by the monks then, they were few, and he had soon read them all. That is when he began talking eagerly to anyone who passed his way. When there was no one to talk to, he talked to himself - just as he was doing now. He unexpectedly found himself saying that he had talked so much all his life to keep himself from feeling alone.

The knight thought hard about this until the sound of his own voice broke the chilling silence. "I guess I've always been afraid to be alone."

As he spoke these words, another door became visible. The knight opened it and stepped into the next room. It was smaller than the previous one.

He sat on the floor and continued thinking. Soon the thought struck him that all his life he had wasted time talking about what he had done and what what he was going to do. He'd never enjoyed what was happening at the time. And yet another door appeared. It led to a room still smaller than the others.

Encouraged by his progress, the knight did something he'd never done before. He sat still and listened to the silence. It occurred to him that for most of his life, he hadn't really listened to anyone or anything. The rustle of the wind, the patter of the rain, and the sound of water running through the brooks must have always been there, but he never actually heard them. Nor had he heard Juliet when she tried to tell him how she felt - especially when she was sad. It reminded the knight that he was sad, too. In fact, one of the reasons why he'd taken to leaving his armor on all the time was that it muffled the sound of Juliet's sad voice. All he had to do was pull down his visor, and he could shut her out.

Juliet must have felt very lonely talking to a man encased in steel - as lonely as he felt sitting in this tomblike room. His own pain and loneliness welled up in him. Soon he felt Juliet's pain and loneliness, too. For years, he had forced her to live in a castle of silence. He burst into tears.

The knight cried for so long that his tears poured through the holes in his visor and soaked the rug beneath him. The tears flowed into the fireplace and doused the fire. Indeed, the entire room was starting to flood, and the knight might have drowned if another door hadn't appeared in the wall just then.

Although he was exhausted from the deluge, he waded to the door, pulled it open, and entered a room that wasn't much bigger than the stall where he'd once kept his horse. "I wonder why these rooms keep getting smaller," he asked himself aloud.



A voice replied, "Because you're closing in on yourself."

Startled, the knight looked around. He was alone - or so he had believed. Who had spoken?

"You did," said the voice in answer to his thought.

The voice seemed to come from within himself. Could that be?

"Yes, it could be," answered the voice. "I am the real you."

"But I'm the real me," protested the knight.

"Look at yourself," said the voice with a note of disgust, "sitting there half-starved in that hunk of junk with a rusted visor and sporting a soggy beard. If you are the real you, both of us are in trouble!"

"Now see here," said the knight, "I've lived all these years without hearing a word from you. Now that I do, the first thing you say is that you are the real me. Why haven't you spoken up before?"

"I've been around for years," replied the voice, "but this is the first time you've been quiet enough to hear me."

The knight was doubtful. "If you're the real me, then, prey tell, who am I?"

The voice replied kindly, "You can't expect to learn everything at once. Why don't you get some sleep."

"All right," said the knight, "but before I do, I want to know what to call you."

"Call me?" asked the voice, puzzled. "Why, I'm you."

"I can't call you me. It confuses me."

"OK. Call me Sam."

"Why Sam?" asked the knight.

"Why not?" came the reply.

"You must know Merlin," said the knight, his head beginning to droop from sleepiness. Then his eyes closed as he fell into a deep, peaceful slumber.

When the knight first awoke, he didn't know where he was. He was only aware of himself. The rest of the world seemed to have vanished. As he grew fully awake, the knight realized that Squirrel and Rebecca were sitting on his chest. "How did you get in here?" he asked.



Squirrel laughed. "We're not in there."

"You're out here," Rebecca cooed.

The knight opened his eyes wider and pushed himself up to a sitting position. He looked around in amazement. Sure enough, he was lying on the Path of Truth just the other side of the Castle of Silence.

"How did I get out of there?" he asked.

Rebecca answered, "The only way possible. You thought your way out."

"The last thing I remember," said the knight, "I was talking to ..." He stopped himself. He wanted to tell Squirrel and Rebecca about Sam, but it wasn't easy to explain. Besides, he might have imagined the whole thing. He had a lot to think about. The knight reached up to scratch his head, and it took him a moment to realize that he was actually scratching his own skin. He clasped both of his gauntleted hands to his head. His helmet had falled away! He touched his face and his long, scraggly beard.

"Squirrel! Rebecca!" he shouted.

"We know," they said merrily in unison. "You must have cried again in the Castle of Silence."

"I did," replied the knight, "but how could a whole helmet rust overnight?"

The animals laughed uproariously. Rebecca lay gasping and flapping on the ground. The knight thought she was going out of her bird. He demanded to know what was so funny.

Squirrel was the first to catch her breath. "You weren't in the castle just overnight."

"Then for how long?"

"What if I told you that while you were in there I could have easily gathered more than five thousand nuts?"

"I would say you're nuts!" exclaimed the knight.

"You were in the castle for a long, long time," affirmed Rebecca.

The knight's mouth dropped open in disbelief. He looked toward the sky and, in a booming voice, said, "Merlin, I must talk to you."

As he had promised, the magician appeared immediately. He was bare except for his long beard, and he was dripping wet. Apparently the knight had caught Merlin taking a bath.

"Sorry about the intrusion," said the knight, "but this is an emergancy! I -"



"It is all right," said Merlin, interrupting. "Magicians are often inconvenienced."

He shook the water from his beard. "To answer your question, it is true. You were in the Castle of Silence for a very long time."

Merlin never failed to astound the knight. "How could you know I wanted to ask you that?"

"Since I know myself, I can know you. We are all part of each other."

The knight thought for a moment. "I'm beginning to understand. I could feel Juliet's pain because I'm part of her?"

"Yes," Merlin answered. "That is why you could cry for her as well as for yourself. That was the first time you shed tears for another."

The knight told Merlin that he felt proud. The magician smiled indulgently. "One does not have to feel proud of being human. It is as pointless as it would be for Rebecca to feel proud that she can fly. Rebecca was born with wings. You were born with a heart - and now you are using it, just as you were meant to do."

"You really know how to bring a fella down, Merlin," said the knight.

"I did not mean to be hard on you. You are doing very well, or you never would have met Sam."

The knight felt relieved. "Then I really did hear him? It wasn't just my imagination?"

Merlin chuckled. "No, Sam is real - in fact, a more real you than the one you have been calling I all these years. You are not going crazy. You are just starting to listen to your real self. That is why time passed so swiftly without your realizing it."

"I don't understand," said the knight.

"You will by the time you go through the Castle of Knowledge." Then Merlin disappeared before the knight could ask any more questions.



Chapter 5
The Castle of Knowledge

The knight, Squirrel, and Rebecca started out once more on the Path of Truth, heading toward the Castle of Knowledge. They stopped only twice that day, once to eat and the other time for the knight to shave off his scraggly beard and cut his long hair with the sharpened edge of his gauntlet. The knight looked and felt much better when this was done, and he was freer now than he'd been before. With the helmet gone, he could eat nuts without Squirrel's help. Though he had appreciated the lifesaving technique, he really didn't consider it gracious living. He could also feed himself the fruits and roots to which he had become accustomed. Never again would he eat pigeon or any other fowl or meat because he realized that doing so would literally be having friends for dinner.

Just before nightfall, the trio trudged over a hill and beheld the Castle of Knowledge in the distance. It was larger than the Castle of Silence, and its door was solid gold. This was the largest castle the knight had ever seen, even larger than what the king had built for himself. The knight stared at the impressive structure and wondered who had designed it.

At that very moment, the knight's thoughts were interrupted by Sam's voice. "The Castle of Knowledge was designed by the universe itself - the source of all knowledge."

The knight was surprised but pleased to hear from Sam again. "I'm glad you're back," he said.

"Actually, I never left," Sam replied. "Remember that I'm you."

"Please, I don't want to go through that again. How do you like me now that I've had a shave and a haircut?"

"It's the first time that you ever profited from being clipped," Sam replied.

The knight laughed at Sam's joke. He liked Sam's sense of humor. If the Castle of Knowledge was anything like the Castle of Silence, he'd be happy to have Sam along for company.

The knight, Squirrel, and Rebecca crossed the drawbridge over the moat and stopped before the golden door. The knight took the key from around his neck and turned it in the lock. As he pushed the door open, he asked Rebecca and Squirrel if they were going to leave as they had done before.

"No," Rebecca replied. "Silence is for one; knowledge is for all."

The knight wondered how the word pigeon had come to mean an easy mark.



The three of them walked through the doorway and into a darkness so dense that the knight couldn't even see his own hand. The knight groped for the customary torches by the castle door to light the way, but there weren't any.

A castle with a door of gold and no torches? "Even cheap tract castles have torches," grumbled the knight as Squirrel called out to him. The knight carefully felt his way to her and saw that she was pointing to an inscription that glowed on the wall. It read:

Knowledge is the light by which
you shall find your way.

I'd rather have a torch, thought the knight, but whoever runs this castle sure is clever at cutting down on light bills.

Sam spoke up. "It means that the more you know, the lighter it will get in here."

"Sam, I'll wager you're right!" exclaimed the knight. And a glimmer of light crept into the room.

Just then, Squirrel called out again for the knight to join her. She had found another inscription that was chiseled into the wall and glowing:

Have you mistaken need for love?

Still perturbed, the knight mumbled, "I suppose I have to figure out the answer before I get any more light."

"You're catching on quickly," Sam replied, to which the knight snorted, "I don't have time to play Twenty Questions. I want to find my way through this castle fast so that I can get to the top of the mountain!"

"Maybe what you're supposed to learn here is that you have all the time in the world," suggested Rebecca.

The knight was not in a receptive mood, and he didn't want to listen to her philosophy. For a moment, he considered plunging into the darkness of the castle and blundering through. The blackness, however, was quite forbidding and, without his sword, he was afraid. It seemed to him that he had no choice but to figure out what the inscription meant. He sighed and sat down before it. He read it again: Have you mistaken need for love?

The knight knew that he loved Juliet and Christopher, although he had to admit that he loved Juliet more before she began lying under wine casks and emptying thier contents into her mouth.

Sam said, "Yes, you loved Juliet and Christopher, but didn't you need them, too?"



"I suppose so," granted the knight. He had needed all the beauty that Juliet added to his life with her quick wit and lovely poetry. He had also needed the nice things she did, like often inviting friends over to cheer him up after he'd gotten stuck in his armor.

He thought back to the times when the knight business had been slow and they couldn't afford to buy new clothes or to employ serving maids. Juliet had made attractive garments for the family to wear, and she had cooked delicious meals for the knight and his friends. The knight reflected that Juliet also kept a very clean castle. He had given her a lot of castles to keep clean, too.

Often they'd had to move into a cheaper one when he came home broke from a crusade. He'd left Juliet on her own to do most of the moving, as he was usually off at some tournament. He remembered how weary she'd looked as she moved their belongings from castle to castle and how sad she'd become when she was unable to reach him through his armor.

"Isn't that when Juliet started lying under wine casks"? asked Sam in a gentle voice.

The knight nodded, and tears began to form in his eyes. Then, a dreadful thought occurred to him: He hadn't wanted to blame himself for the things he did. He preferred to blame Juliet for all her wine drinking. Indeed, he needed her wine drinking so that he could say that everything was her fault - including his being stuck in his armor.

As the knight realized how unfairly he'd used Juliet, tears flowed down his face. Yes, he had needed her more than he loved her. He wished he could have loved her more and needed her less, but he didn't know how.

As he continued to cry, it dawned on the knight that he needed Christopher, too, more than he'd loved him. A knight needed a son to go out and do battle in his father's name when the father grew old. This didn't mean the knight didn't love Christopher, for he loved his son's golden-haired beauty. He also liked to hear Christopher say, "I love you, Dad," but as he'd loved these things about Christopher, they had answered a need in him as well.

A thought came to the knight in a blinding flash: He'd needed the love of Juliet and Christopher because he didn't love himself! In fact, he had needed the love of all the damsels he'd rescued from dragons and all the people for whom he'd fought in crusades because he didn't love himself.

The knight cried harder as he realized that if he didn't love himself, he couldn't really love others. His need for them would get in the way.

As he admitted this, a beautiful, bright light shone around the knight where there once had been darkness. A gentle hand touched his shoulder. Looking up through his tears, he saw Merlin smiling down.

"You have discovered a great truth," the magician told the knight. "You can love others only to the extent that you love yourself."



"How do I begin to love myself?" asked the knight.

"You already have just by knowing what you know," said Merlin.

"I know I'm a fool," sobbed the knight.

"No, you know the truth, and truth is love."

This comforted the knight, and he stopped crying. As his eyes dried, he noticed the light around him. It was unlike any light that he'd seen before. It seemed to come from nowhere, yet everywhere.

Merlin echoed the knight's thought. "There is nothing more beautiful than the light of self-knowledge."

The knight looked at the light around him then into the gloom ahead. "There's no darkness in this castle for you, is there?"

"No," replied Merlin. "Not anymore."

Encouraged, the knight got to his feet, ready to go on. He thanked Merlin for showing up even when he hadn't called him.

"That is all right," said the magician. "One does not always know when to ask for help." And so saying, he vanished.

As the knight started onward, Rebecca came flying out of the darkness ahead.

"Wow!" she said, all atwitter. "Do I have something to show you!"

The knight had never seen Rebecca so excited. She was usually pretty cool, but now she hopped up and down on his shoulder, scarcely able to contain herself as she guided the knight and Squirrel to a large mirror. "That's it! That's it!" Rebecca chirped loudly, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

The knight was disappointed. "It's only a crummy old mirror," he said impatiently.
"C'mon, let's get going."

"It's not an ordinary mirror," Rebecca insisted. "It doesn't show what you look like. It shows what you're really like."

The knight was intrigued but not enthusiastic. He'd never cared much for mirrors because he'd never considered himself very handsome. But Rebecca insisted and, so, reluctantly, he now stood before the mirror and gazed at his reflection. To his amazement, instead of a tall man with sad eyes and a large nose, armored to the neck, he saw a charming, vital person whose eyes shone with compassion and love.



"Who's that?" he asked.

Squirrel answered, "It's you."

"This mirror is a phony," said the knight. "I don't look like that."

"You're seeing the real you," explained Sam, "the you who lives beneath your armor."

"But," protested the knight, looking deeper into the mirror, "that man is a perfect specimen. And his face is full of beauty and innocence."

"That's your potentional answered Sam, "to be beautiful and innocent and perfect."

"If that's my potential," said the knight, "something terrible happened on my way to it."

"Yes," replied Sam, "you put an invisible armor between you and your feelings. It's been there for so long that it's become visible and permanent."

"Maybe I did hide my feelings," said the knight. "But I couldn't just say everything I felt like saying and do everything I felt like doing. Nobody would have liked me." The knight stopped short as he uttered these words, realizing that he'd lived his whole life in a way that would make people like him. He thought of all the crusades he'd fought in, the dragons he'd slain, and the damsels he'd rescued from distress - all to prove that he was good, kind, and loving. The truth was he didn't have to prove anything. He was good, kind, and loving.

"Jumping javelins!" he exclaimed. "I've wasted my whole life!"

"No," Sam said quickly. "It hasn't been wasted. You've needed time to learn what you just learned."

"I still feel like crying," said the knight.

"Now that would be a waste," said Sam. Then he sang this little tune:

Tears of self-pity end up in disgust.
They're not the kind that cause armor to rust.

The knight was in no mood to appreciate Sam's song or his humor. "Stop with those tiresome rhymes, or I'll kick you out," he yelled.

"You can't kick me out," chortled Sam. "I'm you. Don't you remember?"

At that moment, the knight gladly would have shot himself to get rid of Sam, but, luckily, guns hadn't been invented yet. It seemed there was no way to get around Sam.



The knight looked into the mirror again. Kindness, love, compassion, intelligence, and unselfishness looked back at him. He realized that all he had to do to have these qualities was reclaim them, for they had been his all along.

At this thought, the beautiful light shone once more, brighter than before. It illuminated the whole room, revealing, to the knight's surprise, that the castle had only one gigantic room.

"It's the standard building code for a Castle of Knowledge," said Sam. "Real knowledge isn't divided into compartments because it all stems from one truth."

The knight nodded in argreement. He was ready to leave just as Squirrel came running up. "This castle has a courtyard with a big apple tree growing in the center of it."

"Oh, take me to it," said the knight eagerly, for he was getting quite hungry.

The knight and Rebecca followed Squirrel into the courtyard. The sturdy boughsof the large tree bent under the weight of the reddest, shiniest apples that the knight had ever seen.

"How do you like them apples?" quipped Sam.

The knight found himself chuckling. Then he noticed an inscription chiseled on a slab of stone beside the tree:

For this fruit, I impose no condition,
but may you now learn about ambition.

The knight pondered this, but, quite frankly, he had no idea what it meant. Finally, he decided to forget it.

"If you do, we'll never get out of here," said Sam.

The knight groaned. "These inscriptions are getting harder and harder to understand."

"No one ever said that the Castle of Knowledge would be a breeze," Sam said firmly.

The knight sighed, picked an apple, and sat down under the tree with Rebecca and Squirrel.

"Do you get this one?" he asked them.

Squirrel shook her head no.

The knight looked at Rebecca, who also shook her head no. "But I do know," she said thoughtfully, "that I don't have any ambition."

"Neither do I," chimed in Squirrel, "and I'll bet this tree doesn't have any either."



"She's on to something," said Rebecca. "This tree is like us. It has no ambition. Maybe you don't need any."

"That's all right for trees and animals," said the knight. "But what would a person be without ambition?"

"Happy," Sam piped up.

"No, I don't think so."

"All of you are right," said a familiar voice.

The knight turned and saw Merlin standing behind him and the animals. The magician was dressed in his long white robe, and he was carrying a lute.

"I was about to call you," said the knight.

"I know," replied the magician. "Everyone needs help to understand a tree. Trees are content just being trees - the same as Rebecca and Squirrel are happy just being what they are."

"But human beings are different," protested the knight. "They have minds."

"We have minds, too," declared Squirrel, who was somewhat offended.

"Sorry. It's just that human beings have very complicated minds that make them want to become better," explained the knight.

"Better than what?" Merlin asked, idly plucking a few notes on his lute.

"Better than they are," answered the knight.

"They are born beautiful, innocent, and perfect. What could be better than that?" Merlin asked.

"No, I mean that they want to be better than others are ... you know, like I've always wanted to be the best knight in the kingdom."

"Ah, yes," said Merlin, "ambition from that complicated mind of yours led you to try to prove that you were better than other knights."

"So what's wrong with that?" asked the knight defensively.

"How could you be better than other knights when they were all born as beautiful, innocent, and perfect as you were?"

"I was happy trying," replied the knight.



"Were you? Or were you so busy trying to become that you couldn't enjoy just being?"

"You're getting me all confused," muttered the knight. "I know people need ambition. They want to be smart and have nice castles and be able to trade in last year's horse for a new one. They want to get ahead."

"Now you are talking about a man's desire to be rich, but if a person is kind, loving, compassionate, intelligent, and unselfish, how could that person be richer?"

"Those riches can't buy castles and horses," said the knight.

"It is true," Merlin smiled, "there is more than one kind of riches - just as there is more than one kind of ambition."

"It seems to me that ambition is ambition. Either you want to get ahead or you don't."

"There is more to it than that," responded the magician. "Ambition that comes from the mind can get you nice castles, and it can get you fine horses. However, only ambition that comes from the heart can also bring happiness."

"What's ambition from the heart?" questioned the knight.

"Ambition from the heart is pure. It competes with no one and harms no one. In fact, it serves one in such a way that it serves others at the same time."

"How?" asked the knight, trying hard to understand.

"Here's where we can learn from this apple tree. It has become handsome and fully mature, bearing fine fruit which it gives freely to all. The more apples that people pick," said Merlin, "the more the tree grows and the more beautiful it becomes. This tree is doing exactly what apple trees are meant to do - fulfilling it's potential to the benefit of all. It can be the same with people when they have ambition from the heart."

"But," objected the knight, "if I sat around all day giving away free apples, I couldn't own a classy castle and I wouldn't be able to trade in last year's horse for a new one."

"You, like most people, want to have lots of nice things, but it is necessary to separate need from greed."

"Go tell that to a wife who wants a castle in a better neighborhood," retorted the knight.

A hint of amusement flickered across Merlin's face. "You could sell some of your apples to pay for a new castle and horse. Then you could give away the apples you do not need so that others could be nourished."

"It's easier for trees than it is for people in this world," said the knight, philosophically.



"It's all a matter of perception," said Merlin. "You receive the same life energy as a tree. You use the same water, the same air, and the same nourishment from the earth. I assure you that if you learn from the tree, you too can bring forth the fruits that nature intended - and you'll soon have all the horses and castles you want."

"You mean I could get everything I need just by being rooted and staying in my own backyard?" asked the knight quizzically.

Merlin laughed. "Human beings were given two feet so that they would not have to stay in one place, but if they would stand still more often to accept and appreciate instead of running around to grab, they would truly understand ambition from the heart."

The knight sat quietly, contemplating Merlin's words. He studied the apple tree flourishing before him. He looked from it to Squirrel to Rebecca to Merlin. Neither the tree nor the animals had ambition, and Merlin's ambition was obviously from his heart. They all looked happy and well nourished; all were beautiful specimens of life.

Then he considered himself - scrawny and with a beard that had begun to get scraggly again. He was undernourished, nervous, and exhausted from lugging around his heavy armor. All this he had acquired by ambition from the mind, and all this he now knew that he must change. The idea was frightening, but, then again, he'd already lost everything, so, what did he have to lose?

"From this moment on, my ambition will come from the heart," he pledged.

As the knight spoke these words, the castle and Merlin both disappeared, and the knight found himself back on the Path of Truth with Rebecca and Squirrel. Alongside the path was a sparkling brook. Thirsty, he knelt to drink from it and noticed with some surprise that the armor on his arms and legs had rusted and fallen away. His beard was very long again. Evidently, the Castle of Knowledge, like the Castle of Silence, had played tricks with him.

The knight contemplated this rather odd phenomenon and soon realized that Merlin had been right. He decided that time does pass quickly when one is listening to oneself. He recollected how often time had dragged on and on when he was depending upon others to fill it.

With all his armor gone except for the breastplate, the knight felt lighter and younger than he had in years. He also discovered that he liked himself better than he had in years. With the firm step of a young man, he started out for the Castle of Will and Daring with Rebecca flying above him and Squirrel scrambling at his heels.



Chapter 6
The Castle of Will and Daring

By dawn of the next day, the unlikely trio came to the final castle. It was taller than the others, and its walls looked thicker. Confindent that he'd soon pass through this castle as well, the knight started across the drawbridge with the animals.

When they were halfway across, the door to the castle flew open and out lumbered a huge, menacing, fire-breathing dragon, glittering with shiny, green scales. Shocked, the knight stopped dead in his tracks. He'd seen some dragons in his time, but this one beat them all. It was enormous, and flames roared not only out of it's mouth, as was the case with any run-of-the-mill dragon, but also out of it's eyes and ears. To make matters worse, the flames were blue, meaning that this dragon had a high butane content.

The knight reached for his sword, but his hand fell away empty. He began to tremble. In a croaky, unrecognizable voice, the knight called out to Merlin for help, but much to the knight's dismay, the magician didn't appear.

"Why doesn't he come?" the knight asked anxiously as he dodged a jet of blue flame from the monster.

"I don't know," replied Squirrel. "He's usually pretty reliable."

Rebecca, who was sitting on the knight's shoulder, cocked her head and listened attentively. "From what I can pick up, Merlin's in Paris attending a magician's conference."

He can't let me down now, the knight said to himself. He promised there wouldn't be any dragons on the Path of Truth.

"He meant ordinary dragons," roared the monster in a booming voice that shook the trees and nearly knocked Rebecca off the knight's shoulder.

The situation looked grave. A dragon that could read minds was absolutely the worst kind, but somehow the knight forced himself to stop trembling. In the strongest, loudest voice he could command, he shouted, "Get out of my way, you oversized Bunsen burner!"

The beast snorted, sending fire in all directions. "Pretty tough talk from a scaredy-cat."

The knight, not knowing what to do next, stalled for time. "What are you doing in the Castle of Will and Daring?" he asked.

"Can you think of a better place for me to live? I'm the Dragon of Fear and Doubt."

The knight had to admit this dragon was well named. Fear and doubt were precisely what he felt.



The dragon bellowed again. "I'm here to knock off all you smart alecks who think you can lick anybody just because you've been through the Castle of Knowledge."

Rebecca whispered in the knight's ear. "Merlin once said that self-knowledge can kill the Dragon of Fear and Doubt."

"Do you believe that?" the knight whispered back.

"Yes," replied Rebecca firmly.

"Then you take on the jolly green flame thrower!" The knight turned and quickly retreated across the drawbridge.

"Ho, ho, ho," laughed the dragon, its last "ho" nearly igniting the seat of the knight's pants.

"Are you quitting after you've come this far?" Squirrel asked as the knight brushed sparks from his backside.

"I don't know," the knight replied. "I've become used to some little luxuries - like living."

Sam chimed in. "How can you live with yourself if you don't have the will and daring to test your self-knowledge?"

"Do you believe, too, that self-knowledge can kill the Dragon of Fear and Doubt?" asked the knight.

"Certainly. Self-knowledge is truth, and you know what they say: Truth is mightier than the sword."

"I know they say that, but has anybody ever proved it and lived?" quibbled the knight.

No sooner had he uttered these words than the knight remembered he didn't need to prove anything. He was born good, kind, and loving. Therefore, he didn't have to feel fear and doubt. The dragon was only an illusion.

The knight looked across the drawbridge to where the monster was pawing the ground and setting fire to some nearby bushes, apparently to keep in practice. With the thought in mind that the dragon existed only if he believed it did, the knight took a deep breath and slowly marched back over the drawbridge.

The dragon, of course, came out to meet the knight again, snorting and spitting fire. This time, however, the knight continued marching forward. Yet the knight's courage soon began to melt, as did his beard, from the heat of the dragon's flame. With a cry of both fear and anguish, the knight turned and ran.

The dragon let out a might laugh and shot a stream of searing flame at the retreating knight. With a howl of pain, the knight flew across the drawbridge with Squirrel and Rebecca close



behind him. Spotting a small brook, he quickly plunged his scorched seat into the cool water, quenching the flames with a hiss.

Squirrel and Rebecca stood on the bank, trying to comfort him.

"You were very brave," said Squirrel.

"Not too bad for a first try," added Rebecca.

Astonished, the knight looked up from where he sat. "What do you mean, first try?"

Squirrel said matter-of-factly, "You'll do better when you go back the second time."

The knight retorted angrily, "You go back a second time!"

"Remember, the dragon was only an illusion," said Rebecca.

"And the fire coming out of its mouth? Was that an illusion, too?"

"Right," answered Rebecca. "The fire was an illusion, too."

"Then why am I sitting in this brook with a burned behind?" demanded the knight.

"Because you made the fire real by believing that the dragon is real," explained Rebecca.

"If you believe the Dragon of Fear and Doubt is real, you give it the power to burn your behind or anything else," said Squirrel.

"They're right," added Sam. "You have to go back and face the dragon once and for all."

The knight felt concerned. It was three against one. Or rather, it was two and a half; for the Sam half of the knight agreed with Squirrel and Rebecca, while the other half of him wanted to stay in the brook.

As the knight grappled with his flagging courage, he heard Sam say, "God gave man courage. Courage gives God to man."

"I'm tired of figuring out what things mean. I'd much rather just sit here in the brook and relax."

"Look," Sam encouraged, "if you face the dragon, there's a chance that it will destroy you, but if you don't face the dragon, it will surely destroy you."

"Decisions are simple when there's really no alternative," said the knight. Reluctantly, he struggled to his feet, took a deep breath, and once again started across the drawbridge.



The dragon looked up in disbelief. This was certainly a stubborn fellow. "Back again?" it snorted. "Well, this time I'm really going to burn you!"

But it was a different knight who was marching toward the dragon now - a knight who chanted over and over, "Fear and doubt are illusions."

The dragon threw gigantic, crackling flames at the knight, time and time again, but, try as hard as the monster might, it couldn't set fire to him.

As the knight continued to approach, the dragon became smaller and smaller, until it was finally no bigger than a frog. It's flame extinguished, the dragon began to spit small seeds at the knight. But these seeds - the Seeds of Doubt - didn't stop the knight either. The dragon became still smaller as the knight continued to advance determinedly.

"I've won!" shouted the knight victoriously.

The dragon could barely speak. "Perhaps this time, but I'll be back again and again to stand in your way." With that, it vanished in a puff of blue smoke.

"Come back whenever you want," the knight called after it. "Each time you do, I'll be stronger, and you'll be weaker."

Rebecca flew up and landed on the knight's shoulder. "You see, I was right. Self-knowledge can kill the Dragon of Fear and Doubt."

"If you truly believed that, why didn't you walk up to the dragon with me?" asked the knight, no longer feeling inferior to his feathered friend.

Rebecca fluffed her feathers. "I wouldn't have wanted to interfere. It's your trip."

Amused, the knight started to reach for the castle door, but the Castle of Will and Daring was gone!

Sam explained, "You don't have to learn will and daring because you've just shown that you have them."

The knight threw back his head, laughing in pure joy. He could see the top of the mountain. The path appeared much steeper than it had been so far, but it didn't matter.

He knew that nothing could stop him now.



Chapter 7
The Summit of Truth

Inch by inch and hand over hand, the knight climbed, his fingers bleeding from holding onto the sharp rocks. When he was almost to the top, his path was blocked by a huge boulder. Not surprisingly, it had an inscription chiseled on it:

Though this universe I own,
I possess not a thing,
for I cannot know the unknown
if to the known I cling.

The knight felt entirely too exhausted to overcome this final hurdle. It seemed impossible to decipher the inscription while clinging to the side of the mountain at the same time, but he knew he had to try.

Squirrel and Rebecca were tempted to offer sympathy, but quickly stopped themselves, knowing that sympathy can weaken a human being.

The knight took a deep breath, which somewhat cleared his head. Then he read the last part of the inscription aloud: "for I cannot know the unknown if to the known I cling."

The knight considered some of the "knowns" to which he had been clinging to all his life. There was his idenity - who he thought he was and who he thought he wasn't. There were his beliefs - those things he thought were true and those things he thought were false. And there were his judgements - the things he held as good and those he held as bad.

The knight looked up at the rock, and a horrifying thought entered his mind: The rock to which he was clinging for dear life was also known to him. Did the inscription mean that he would have to let go and fall into the abyss of the unknown?

"You've got it right, Knight," said Sam. "You have to let go."

"What are you trying to do - kill both of us?" the knight screamed.

"Actually, we're dying right now," said Sam. "Take a look at yourself. You're so thin you could be slipped under a door, and you're full of stress and fear."

"I'm not nearly as afraid as I used to be," said the knight.

"If that's the case, then let go - and trust," said Sam.

"Trust whom?" the knight retorted hotly. He wanted no more of Sam's philosophy.

"Not whom," Sam replied. "It's not a who but an it!"



"It?" asked the knight.

"Yes," said Sam. "It - life, the force, the universe, God - whatever you want to call it."

The knight peered over his shoulder into the apparently bottomless chasm below.

"Let go," Sam whispered urgently.

The knight seemed to have no choice. He was losing strength every second, and blood was now oozing from his fingertips where he clutched the rock. Believing that he was going to die, the knight let go and plunged down, down into the infinite depth of his memories.

He recalled all the things in his life for which he had blamed his mother, his father, his teachers, his wife, his son, his friends, and everyone else. As he fell deeper into the void, he let go of all the judgements that he'd made against them.

Faster and faster he dropped, giddy as his mind descended into his heart. Then, for the first time, he saw his life clearly, without judgement and without excuses. In that instant, he accepted full responsibility for his life, for the influence that people had had on it, and for the events that had shaped it.

From this moment on, he would no longer blame his mistakes and misfortunes on anyone or anything outside himself. The recognition that he was the cause, not the effect, gave him a new feeling of power. He was now unafraid.

As an unfamiliar sense of calm overtook him, a strange thing happened: he began to fall upward! Yes, impossible as it seemed, he was falling up, up out of the abyss! At the same time, he still felt connected to the deepest part of it - in fact, he felt connected to the very center of the earth. He continued falling higher and higher, knowing that he was joined to both heaven and earth.

Suddenly, he was no longer falling but standing on top of the mountain, and he knew the full meaning of the inscription on the rock. He'd let go of all that he'd feared and all he had known and possessed. His willingness to embrace the unknown had set him free. Now the universe was his to experience and enjoy.

The knight stood on the mountaintop breathing deeply, and an overwhelming sense of well-being swept through him. He grew dizzy from the enchantment of seeing, hearing, and feeling the universe all around him. Before, fear of the unknown had dulled his senses, but now he was able to experience everything with breathtaking clarity. The warmth of the afternoon sun, the melody of the gentle mountain breeze, and the beauty of nature's shapes and colors that painted the landscape as far as his eyes could see filled the knight with indescribable pleasure. His heart brimmed with love - for himself, for Juliet and Christopher, for Merlin, for Squirrel and Rebecca, for life, and for the entire wondrous world.

Squirrel and Rebecca watched the knight drop to his knees, tears of gratitude flowing from his eyes. I nearly died from the tears I left uncried, he thought. The tears poured down his



cheecks, through his beard, and onto his breastplate. Because they came from his heart, the tears were extraordinarily hot, and they quickly melted the last of his armor.

The knight cried out with joy. No more would he don his armor and ride off in all directions. No more would people see the shining reflection of steel and think that the sun was rising in the north or setting in the east.

He smiled through his tears, unaware that a radiant, new light now shone from him - a light far brighter and more beautiful than his armor at its polished best - sparkling like a brook, shining like the moon, dazzling like the sun.

For, indeed, the knight was the brook. He was the moon. He was the sun. He could be all these things at once now, and more, because he was one with the universe.

He was love.

The Beginning

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