THE KNIGHT IN RUSTY ARMOR

**PART 2**

**Robert Fisher**

# THE CASTLE OF SILENCE

Left to his own devices, the knight cautiously peeked his head out of the castle door. His knees trembled slightly, so he produced a clanking noise from his armor. Not wanting to look like a chicken in front of a pigeon, in case Rebecca could see him, he gathered his strength and entered bravely, closing the door behind him.

For a moment he wished he had not left his sword behind, but Merlin had promised him that he would not have to slay dragons, and the knight trusted the wizard.

He entered the huge antechamber of the castle and looked around. He saw only the fire burning in a huge stone fireplace on one of the walls and three rugs on the floor. He sat down on the rug closest to the fire.

The knight soon realized two things: first, there seemed to be no door leading out of the room into other areas of the castle. Second, there was an extraordinary and terrifying silence. He was startled to notice that the fire did not even crackle. The knight thought his castle was silent, especially at times when Juliet did not speak to him for days, but that was nothing compared to this. The Castle of Silence lived up to its name, he thought. He had never felt so lonely in his life.

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

* Hello gentleman.

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

-I didn't even see you. - he said, his voice cracking, "I didn't even see you. What are you doing here?

* The same as you, gentleman: looking for the door.

The gentleman looked around again.

* + I don't see any door.
  + One cannot really see until one understands," said the King, "When you understand what is in this room, you will be able to see the door that leads to the next room.
  + Definitely, I hope so, king," said the knight, "I am surprised to see you here. I had heard you were on a crusade.
  + That's what they always say when I travel the Path of Truth," explained the king, "My subjects understand it better that way.

The gentleman looked puzzled.

* + Everyone understands the crusades," said the king, "but very few understand the Truth.
  + Yes - nodded the knight - I myself would not be on this Path if I were not trapped in this armor.
  + Most people are trapped in their armor - declared the king.
  + What do you mean? - asked the gentleman.
  + We put up barriers to protect ourselves from who we think we are. Then one day we get trapped behind the barriers and can no longer get out.
  + I never thought you were trapped, king. You are so wise," said the knight. The king burst out laughing.
  + I am wise enough to know when I am stuck, and also to come back here to learn more about myself. The knight was excited, thinking that perhaps the king could show him the way.
  + Tell me - said the knight, his face lit up - could we go through the castle together? Then it wouldn't be so lonely.

The king shook his head.

* + I tried it once. It is true that my companions and I did not feel lonely because we talked constantly, but when you talk it is impossible to see the door out of this room.
  + Maybe we could just walk together, without talking - suggested the knight. He didn't feel much like having to walk alone through the Castle of Silence.

The king shook his head again, this time more forcefully.

* + No, I tried that too. It made the vacuum less painful, but I couldn't see the exit door either. The gentleman protested.
  + But if you weren't talking...
  + Remaining silent is more than just not talking," said the king, "I found that when I was with someone, I showed only my best image. I didn't let my barriers down, so that neither I nor the other person could see what I was trying to hide.
  + I don't get it," said the gentleman.
  + You will understand," replied the king, "when you have been here long enough. One must be alone to be able to drop his armor.

The gentleman was desperate.

* + I don't want to stay here alone! - he exclaimed, tapping the ground with his foot, and involuntarily dropping it on the king's foot.

The king cried out in pain and began to jump up and down.

The knight was horrified! First to the blacksmith; now to the king.

* + Excuse me, sir," he said, apologetically.

The king stroked his foot gently.

* + Oh, well. That armor hurts you more than it hurts me - then, he looked at the knight with a wise expression.

-. I understand that you don't want to stay alone in the castle. I didn't want to the first few times I was here either, but now I realize that what one has to do here, one has to do alone." Having said this, he limped away as he said, "Now I must go.

Perplexed, the gentleman asked:

* + Where are you going? The door is this way.
  + That door is an entrance only. The door that leads to the next room is on the far wall. I saw it, at last, when you were entering," said the king.

-What do you mean, you finally saw her? Didn't you remember where she was from the other times you were here? - asked the knight, not understanding why the king kept coming back.

* + One never finishes traveling the Path of Truth. Each time I come, as I understand more and more, I find new doors," the king waved goodbye, "Treat yourself well, good friend.

-Please guard! - begged the knight. The king turned and looked at him with compassion.

-Yes?

The knight, who could not shake the king's resolve, asked:

* + Is there any advice you can give me before you go? The king thought for a moment, then answered:
* This is a new kind of crusade for you, dear knight: one that requires more courage than all the other battles you have known before. If you can muster the necessary strength and stay to do what you have to do here it will be your greatest victory.

Having said this, the king turned and, stretching out his arm as if to open a door, disappeared into the wall, leaving the knight staring in disbelief.

The knight ran to the place where the king had been, hoping that, up close, he would also be able to see the door. Finding only what appeared to be a solid wall, he began to walk around the room. The only thing the knight could hear was the sound of his armor echoing throughout the castle.

After a while, he felt more depressed than ever. To cheer himself up, he sang a couple of battle songs: *I'll be with you to take you on a Crusade, baby and Wherever I leave my helmet, it's my home.* He sang them over and over again.

As his voice grew weary, the stillness began to drown out his singing, enveloping him in utter silence. Only then could the knight frankly admit something he already knew: he was afraid of being alone.

At that moment, he saw a door on the far wall of the room. He went to it, opened it slowly and entered another room. This other room was much like the previous one, only smaller. This one, too, was empty of all sound.

To pass the time, the gentleman began to talk to himself. He said whatever came to mind. He talked about how he was as a child and how he was different from the other children he knew. While they hunted quail and played "Pin the Tail on the Donkey," he stayed home and read. Since the books were manuscripts of the monks in those days, there were few of them, and very soon he had read them all. It was then that he began to talk to everyone who passed in front of him. When there was no one to talk to, he talked to himself, just as he does now.

He found himself saying that he had talked so much throughout his life to avoid feeling lonely.

The gentleman thought deeply about this until the sound of his own voice broke the terrifying silence.

* I guess I've always been afraid of being alone.

As he uttered these words, another door came into view. The gentleman opened it and entered the next room. It was even smaller than the previous one.

He sat down on the floor and continued to think. Before long, the thought came to him that all his life he had wasted his time talking about what he had done and what he was going to do. He had never enjoyed what was happening in the moment. And then another door appeared. It led to a room even smaller than the previous ones.

Encouraged by his progress, the knight did something he had never done before. He stood still and listened to the silence. He realized that, for most of his life, he had not really listened to anyone or anything. The sound of the wind, the sound of the rain, the sound of the water running in the streams, had always been there, but he had never really heard them. Nor had he heard Juliet, when she tried to tell him how she felt; especially when she was sad. It made him remember that he was sad too. In fact, one of the reasons he had decided to keep his armor on all the time was because it drowned out Juliet's sad voice. All he had to do was lower the visor and he could no longer hear her.

Juliet must have felt very lonely talking to a man wrapped in steel; as lonely as he had felt in this dreary room. His own pain and loneliness surfaced. He began to feel Juliet's pain and loneliness as well. For years, he had forced her to live in a castle of silence. She began to cry.

The gentleman cried so hard that the tears spilled out of the holes in his visor and soaked the carpet.

underneath him. Tears flowed down the chimney and extinguished the fire. In fact, the whole room had begun to flood, and the gentleman would have drowned had it not been for the fact that at that very moment another door appeared.

Although he was exhausted from the deluge, he crawled to the door, opened it and entered a room that was not much bigger than his horse's stall.

* I wonder why the rooms are getting smaller and smaller - he said aloud. A voice replied:
* Because you are getting closer to yourself.

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

* You have spoken," said the voice in response to his thought. The voice seemed to come from inside himself. Was that possible?
* Yes, it is possible - answered the voice - I am the real you.
* But I am the real me. protested the gentleman.
* Look at you," the voice said with slight distaste. Sitting there half-dead, inside that pile of tin, with a rusty visor and a beard like soup. If you're the real you, we're both in trouble!
* Now you listen to me," said the gentleman, "I have lived all these years without hearing a word about you. Now that I hear, the first thing you tell me is that you are the real me. Why didn't you speak to me before?
* I've been here for years," replied the voice, "but this is the first time you've been quiet enough to hear me. The gentleman hesitated.
  + If you are the real me, then please tell me who am I? The voice replied kindly.
  + You can't expect to learn everything at once. Why don't you go to sleep?
  + All right," said the gentleman, "but first, I want to know what I should call you.

-Call me? - asked the voice, perplexed, "But I am you.

* + I can't call you me. It confuses me.
  + Okay, it's all right. Call me Sam.
  + Why Sam?

-And why not? - was the answer.

* + You have to meet Merlin," said the knight, beginning to nod with fatigue. Then his eyes closed as he sank into a deep, sweet sleep.

When he awoke, he did not know where he was. He was only aware of himself. The rest of the world seemed to have vanished. As he woke up, the gentleman realized that Squirrel and Rebecca were sitting on his chest.

-How did you get in here? - he asked. Squirrel laughed.

* + We are not there.
  + You are here," Rebecca cooed.

The gentleman opened his eyes wider and sat up. He looked around in surprise. Sure enough, he was sitting on the Path of Truth, on the other side of the Castle of Silence.

-How did I get out of there? - he asked. Rebeca answered:

* + The only way possible, by thinking.
  + The last thing I remember," said the gentleman, "is that I was sitting talking to.... - Here he stopped. He wanted to tell Rebecca and Squirrel about Sam, but it wasn't easy to explain. Besides, he could have imagined it all. He had a lot to think about. The gentleman scratched his head, but it took him a moment to realize that he was actually scratching his own skin. He brought both steel-wrapped hands to his head - his helmet was gone! He touched his face and long beard -Squirrel! Rebecca! - he shouted.
  + We know - they said in joyful unison - You must have cried again in the Castle of Silence.
  + I did," replied the knight, "But how can a whole helmet have rusted in one night?

The animals laughed uproariously. Rebecca lay breathless, flapping her wings against the ground. It seemed to the gentleman that he was out of his little birds. He demanded to know what was so funny.

Squirrel was the first to catch her breath.

* + You were not only in the castle for one night.
  + So, for how long?
  + What if I told you that while you were in there I could have easily collected more than five thousand nuts?

-I'd say you're crazy! - exclaimed the gentleman.

* + Well, you stayed in the castle for a very, very long time," said Rebecca.

The knight dropped his jaw in disbelief. He looked skyward and, in a resonant voice, said:

* + Merlin, I must talk to you.

As promised, the magician appeared immediately. He was naked, except for his long beard, and he was completely wet. It seemed that the knight had caught him while taking a bath.

* + Sorry for the intrusion - said the gentleman - but it was an emergency. I...
  + No problem," said Merlin, interrupting him, "We wizards are often disturbed," he shook the water from his beard, "In answer to your question, I have to tell you that it is true. You stayed in the

Castle of Silence for a long time. Merlin never ceased to surprise the knight.

* + How did you know what I wanted to ask you?
  + Because I know me, I can know you. We are all part of each other. The gentleman thought for a moment.
  + I am beginning to understand. Have I been able to understand Juliet's pain because I am part of it?
  + Yes," Merlin replied, "That's why you were able to cry for her and for yourself. It was the first time you had ever shed tears for another person.

The knight told Merlin that he was proud. The wizard smiled indulgently.

* + One should not be proud of being human. It makes as little sense as Rebecca being proud of being able to fly. Rebecca was born with wings. You were born with a heart, and now you are using it, as is natural.
  + You really know how to discourage a friend, Merlin.
  + I didn't mean to be hard on you. You are doing well, otherwise you wouldn't have met Sam. The gentleman was relieved.
  + So I really heard it, it wasn't just my imagination? Merlin let out a chuckle.
  + No, Sam is real. In fact, he's a more real me than the me you've been calling me over the years. You are not going crazy. You are simply beginning to hear the real you. This is why time passed without your noticing.
* I don't understand," said the gentleman.
* You will understand when you have passed through the Castle of Knowledge. Before the knight could ask any more questions, Merlin disappeared.

# THE CASTLE OF KNOWLEDGE

The knight, Squirrel and Rebecca continued their journey along the Path of Truth, heading for the Castle of Knowledge. They stopped only twice that day, once to eat and once for the knight to shave his scraggy beard and cut his long hair with the sharp edge of the gauntlet. Once this was done, the knight looked better and felt much better, freer than before. Without the helmet he could eat nuts without Squirrel's help. Although he had appreciated the lifesaving technique, he did not consider that to be a really elegant way of life. He could also feed on fruits and roots to which he had become accustomed. He would never again eat pigeon or any other poultry or meat, for he realized that to do so would literally be like eating his friends.

Just before nightfall, the trio continued trudging up a hill and beheld the Castle of Knowledge in the distance. It was larger than the Castle of Silence, and the gate was solid gold. It was the largest castle the knight had ever seen, even larger than the one the knight had built for himself. The knight gazed at the impressive structure and wondered who had designed it.

At that precise moment, his 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 both surprised and pleased to hear Sam's voice again.
* I'm glad you're back," he said.
* Actually, I never left - replied Sam - remember that I am you.
* Please, I don't want to hear that again. How do I look to you now that I've shaved and cut my hair?
* It's the first time you've benefited from being sheared," replied Sam.

The gentleman laughed at Sam's joke. He liked his sense of humor. If the Castle of Knowledge resembled the Castle of Silence, he would be happy to have Sam for company.

The knight, Rebecca and Squirrel crossed the drawbridge over the moat and stopped before the golden door. The knight took the key that hung around his neck and turned the lock. As he opened the door, he asked Rebecca and Chipmunk if they would leave as they had done at Castle Silence.

* No - replied Squirrel - Silence is for one; knowledge is for all.

The gentleman wondered how it was possible that a pigeon could be considered an easy target.

The three went through the door and entered a darkness so dense that the knight could not even see his own hand. The knight groped for the usual torches that usually stand at the entrance of castles, but there were none. A castle with a golden door and no torches?

* Even the castles in the cheap area have torches," grumbled the knight as Chipmunk called out to him.

The knight groped his way to where she stood and saw that she was pointing to an inscription glowing on the wall. It read: *Knowledge is the light that will illuminate your path.*

"I'd prefer a torch," thought the knight, "whoever it is that runs this castle is determined to reduce the electricity bills!

Sam spoke:

* It means that the more things you know, the more light there will be inside the castle.

-I bet you're right, Sam! - exclaimed the gentleman. And a ray of light filtered into the room.

At that precise moment, Squirrel called the knight back to join her. He had found another brilliant inscription engraved on the wall:

*Have you confused need with love?*

Still disturbed, the gentleman mumbled:

* I guess I have to find the answer to get a little more light.
* You're catching on fast," Sam replied, to which the gentleman snorted back:
* I don't have time to play Q & A. I want to find my way through the castle so I can get to the top of the mountain soon!
* Maybe what you have to learn here is that you have all the time in the world," suggested Rebecca.

The knight was not in a very receptive mood and did not feel like listening to his philosophy. For a moment he considered going into the darkness of the castle and trying to break through. The blackness, however, was quite intimidating and, without his sword, he felt fearful. It seemed to him that the only alternative left to him was to try to decipher the meaning of the inscription. He sighed and sat down before it. He read it again; "Have you mistaken necessity for love?"

The gentleman knew he loved Juliet and Christopher, although he had to admit that he had loved Juliet more before he took to standing under the wine barrels and emptying their contents into his mouth.

San said:

* Yes, you loved Juliet and Christopher, but didn't you need them too?
* I suppose so," admitted the gentleman.

He had needed all the beauty that Juliet added to his life with her intelligence and charming poetry. He had also needed the nice things she used to do, like inviting friends over to cheer him up, after he got stuck in his armor.

He remembered the times when the knighthood business had been at a low ebb and they could not afford to buy new clothes or hire servants. Juliet had made beautiful dresses for the family and had prepared delicious dishes for the knight and his friends. The knight recognized that Juliet

had always kept the castle very clean. And he had given her many castles to clean. They had often had to move to a cheaper castle when he had returned from the crusades without a penny. She had let Juliet do most of the moving by herself, since he was usually always at some tournament. He remembered her exhausted look as she carried his belongings from one castle to another, and how she had looked when she found herself unable to touch him because of the armor.

* + Wasn't that when Juliet started getting under the wine barrels? - Sam asked softly.

The gentleman nodded, and tears welled up in his eyes. Then something dreadful occurred to him: he had not wanted to blame himself for the things he did. He had preferred to blame Juliet for all the wine he drank. In fact, it suited him just fine that she drank, so he could say that everything was his fault, including the fact that he was trapped in the armor.

As the knight realized how unfair he had been to Juliet, tears were streaming down his cheeks. Yes, he had needed her more than he had loved her. He wished he had needed her less and loved her more, but he had not known how to do it.

As she continued to weep, it came to her mind that she had also needed Christopher more than she had loved him. A knight needed a son to go off to battle and fight on his father's behalf when he grew older. This was not to say that the knight did not love Cristobal, for he loved his son's beauty. He also enjoyed hearing him say, "I love you daddy," but, just as he had loved these things about Christopher, they also responded to a need of his own.

A thought came to his mind like a flash of lightning: He had needed the love of Juliet and Christopher because he did not love himself! In fact, he had needed the love of all the damsels he had rescued and all the people he had fought for in the crusades because he did not love himself.

The knight wept even more as he realized that if he did not love himself, he could not truly love others. His need for them would get in the way.

As he admitted this, a beautiful, glowing light shone around him, where before there had been darkness. A hand rested gently on her shoulder. She looked through her tears and saw Merlin smiling at her.

* + You have discovered a great truth - said the magician to the knight - You can only love others as much as you love yourself.
  + And how do I begin to love myself? - asked the gentleman.
  + You have already begun, knowing what you now know," said Merlin.
  + I know I am a fool - sobbed the gentleman.
  + No, you know the truth, and the truth is love.

This consoled the gentleman, who stopped crying. As his tears dried, he noticed the light around him. It was unlike any light he had ever seen before.

It seemed to come from n o w h e r e , and everywhere at once. Merlin echoed the knight's thought:

* + There is nothing more beautiful than the light of knowledge.

The knight looked at the light around him and then into the distant darkness.

* + For you, there is no darkness in this castle, is there?
  + No," replied Merlin, "Not anymore.

Encouraged, the knight stood up, ready to continue. He thanked Merlin for showing up even without being called.

* + It's all right," said the magician, "You don't always know when to ask for help. And, having said that, he disappeared.

As the knight prepared to continue, Rebecca appeared flying out of the darkness.

Listen up! - she said all excited, "Wait till you see what I'm going to show you!

The knight had never seen Rebecca so excited. Normally, she was rather quiet, but now she kept jumping up and down on his shoulder, unable to contain herself as she led the knight and Squirrel towards a large mirror.

* + That's it! That's it! - he chirped aloud, eyes sparkling with excitement. The gentleman was disappointed.
  + It's just an old mirror - he said impatiently - Come on, let's get going.
  + It's not an ordinary mirror - insisted Rebeca - It doesn't reflect how you look. It reflects what you really look like.

The gentleman was intrigued, but not excited. He had never cared much for mirrors because he had never considered himself very handsome. But Rebecca insisted, so he reluctantly stood before the mirror and gazed at his reflection. To her great surprise, instead of a tall man with sad eyes and a large nose, with

armor up to his neck, he saw a charming and vital person, whose eyes shone with love and compassion.

* Who is it? - Squirrel answered:
* It is you.
* This mirror is a ghost - said the gentleman - I am not like that.
* You are seeing your true self," Sam explained, "the self that lives under that armor.
* But - protested the gentleman, contemplating himself carefully in the mirror - that man is a perfect specimen. And his face is full of innocence and beauty.
* That's his potential," Sam replied, "to be beautiful, innocent and perfect.
* If that's my potential," said the gentleman, "something terrible happened on the way.
* Yes - replied Sam - you put an invisible armor between you and your true feelings. It has been there for so long that it has become visible and permanent.
* Maybe I did hide my feelings - said the gentleman - But I couldn't just say everything that came into my head and do whatever I wanted. No one would have loved me. - The knight paused as he uttered these words, for he realized that he had spent his life trying to please people. He thought of all the crusades he had fought in, the dragons he had slain, and the damsels in distress he had rescued: all to prove that he was good, generous and loving. Actually, he didn't have to prove anything. He was good, generous and loving.
* Jumping javelins! - he exclaimed - I've wasted my whole life!
* NO," said Sam, quickly, "You didn't waste it. You needed time to learn everything you've learned.
* I still feel like crying - said the gentleman.
* Well, that would be a waste," said Sam. Then he sang this song.

"Tears of self-pity can't help you. They are not the kind that to your armor can remove" The knight was in no mood to appreciate either the song or Sam's humor.

* Stop that heavy rhyming, or I'll throw you out," he shrieked.
* You can't throw me out," laughed Sam, "I'm you. Don't you remember?

At that moment, the knight would have gladly shot himself to get rid of Sam, but fortunately, firearms had not yet been invented. Apparently, there was no way to get rid of Sam.

The gentleman looked in the mirror again. Kindness, compassion, love, intelligence and generosity returned his gaze. He realized that all he had to do to have all those qualities was to claim them, for they had always been there.

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

* It is the standard construction for a Castle of Knowledge - said Sam.
* True Knowledge is not divided into compartments because everything comes from a single truth. The knight nodded. He was ready to leave just as Squirrel came running up.
* This castle has a courtyard with a large apple tree in the center.
* Oh, take me to him - asked the anxious knight, for he was beginning to feel hungry.

The knight and Rebecca followed Squirrel into the courtyard. The sturdy branches of the tree were twisting under the weight o f the brightest, reddest apples the knight had ever seen.

* Do you like apples? - Sam asked.

The knight found himself laughing. Then he noticed an inscription engraved on a slab next to the tree:

*For this fruit I impose condition, but now you will learn about ambition.*

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

* If you do, we won't get out of here," said Sam. The knight grunted.
* These inscriptions are increasingly difficult to understand.
* No one said the Castle of Knowledge was easy," said Sam firmly.

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

* Do you understand? - he asked. Squirrel shook her head.

The gentleman looked at Rebecca, who also shook her head.

* But what I do know," she said thoughtfully, "is that I have no ambition.
* Neither do I," interjected Chipmunk, "and I bet this tree doesn't have any either.
* He's right," said Rebeca, "This tree is like us. It has no ambitions. Maybe you don't need any.
* This is fine for animals and trees - said the gentleman - But what would a person be if he had no ambition?
* Happy - said Sam
* No, I don't think so.
* You are all right," said a familiar voice.

The knight turned and saw Merlin standing behind him and the animals. The wizard wore his long white robe and carried a lute.

* + I was about to call you, Merlin," said the knight.
  + I know," replied the wizard, "Everyone needs help to understand a tree. Trees are happy just being trees, just as Rebecca and Squirrel are happy just being what they are.
  + But humans are different - protested the gentleman - we have minds.
  + We have minds too," declared Squirrel, somewhat offended.
  + I'm sorry. It's just that human beings have more complicated minds that make us want to be

better - explained the gentleman.

* + Better than what? - Merlin asked, idly playing a few notes on his lute.
  + Better than we are - replied the gentleman.
  + You are born beautiful, innocent and perfect. What could be better than that? - Merlin demanded.
  + No, I mean we want to be better than we think we are, and better than others... you know, like me, who always wanted to be the best knight in the kingdom.
  + Ah, yes," admitted Merlin, "the ambition of your complicated mind led you to try to prove that you were better than other knights.
  + And what's wrong with that? - asked the gentleman defensively.
  + How could you be better than other knights if you were all born as innocent and perfect as you were?
  + At least I was happy trying - replied the gentleman.
  + Were you? Or were you so busy trying to be that you couldn't enjoy the simple fact of being?
  + You are confusing me - the knight mused - I know that people need to have ambition. They want to be smart and have nice castles and be able to trade last year's horse for a new one. They want to progress.
  + Now you are talking about man's desire to become rich; but if a person is generous, loving, compassionate, intelligent and altruistic, how could he be richer?
  + Those riches are not enough to buy castles and horses - said the knight.
  + It is true," Merlin smiled, "there is more than one kind of wealth, just as there is more than one kind of ambition.
  + It seems to me that ambition is ambition. Either you want to progress or you don't.
  + It's more complicated than that," replied the magician, "The ambition that comes from the mind can give you nice castles and good horses. However, only the ambition that comes from the heart can also bring you happiness.
  + What is the ambition of the heart? - asked the gentleman.
  + The ambition of 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 gentleman, straining to understand.
  + It is here that we can learn from the apple tree. It has become a beautiful and mature tree, which generously gives its fruits to everyone. The more apples more people pick," said Merlin, "the more the tree grows and the more beautiful it becomes. This tree does exactly what an apple tree should do: develop its potential for the benefit of all. The same is true for people who have ambitions of the heart.
  + But - objected the knight - if I spent the day giving away apples, I couldn't have an elegant castle and I couldn't change last year's horse for a new one.
  + You, like most people, want to possess many beautiful things, but it is necessary to separate need from greed.
  + Say that to a wife who wants a castle in a better neighborhood," replied the knight scathingly. An amused expression came over Merlin's face.
  + You could sell some of your apples to pay for the castle and the horse. Then you could give the apples you don't need to feed the others.
  + This world is easier for trees than for people - said the gentleman philosophically.
  + It is a matter of perception," said Merlin, "You receive the same vital energy as the tree. You use the same water, the same air and the same nutrition from the earth. I assure you that if you learn from the tree you will be able to bear fruit and it will not be long before you have all the horses and castles you desire.
  + You mean I could get everything I need just by standing still in my own garden? - asked the gentleman. Merlin laughed.
  + Human beings were given two feet so that they would not have to stay in one place, but if t h e y would stand still more often so that they could accept and appreciate, instead of going here and there trying to grab everything they can, they would truly understand what ambition of the heart is.

The knight remained silent, pondering Merlin's words. He studied the apple tree blossoming before his eyes. He watched Squirrel, Rebecca and Merlin. Neither the tree nor the animals had ambition, and Merlin's ambition no doubt came from his heart. All remained healthy and happy; they were beautiful specimens of life.

Then he thought of himself: scrawny and with a beard that was starting to look bad. He was malnourished, nervous, and exhausted from having to drag his heavy armor around. He had acquired all this from his

mental ambition, and now he understood that all that had to change. The idea inspired fear in him, but then he thought that he had already lost everything, so what more could he lose?

* From this moment on, my ambitions will come from the heart - promised the gentleman.

As he spoke these words, the castle and Merlin disappeared, and the knight found himself again on the Path of Truth, with Rebecca and Squirrel. Beside the path stretched a babbling brook. Thirsty, he knelt down to drink of its water and noticed with surprise that the armor covering his arms and legs had rusted and fallen off. His beard had grown. It was evident that the Castle of Knowledge, like the Castle of Silence, had played with time.

The knight reflected on this strange phenomenon and it did not take him long to realize that Merlin was right.

true. He decided it was true, that time passed quickly when one listened to oneself. He remembered how many times time had gone on forever while he waited for other people to fill it.

Now that all that remained of his armor was the breastplate, the knight felt lighter and younger than he had in years. He also discovered that he hadn't felt this good about himself in a long time. With the steady stride of a boy, he set off for the Castle of Will and Boldness with Rebecca flying over his head and Squirrel running at his feet.

# THE CASTLE OF WILL AND DARING

Towards dawn the next day, the unlikely trio arrived at the last castle. It was higher than the others and its walls seemed thicker. Confident that he would pass quickly through this castle, the knight crossed the drawbridge with the animals.

When they were halfway there, the castle door burst open and a huge, menacing dragon, covered in gleaming green scales, emerged from inside, spewing fire from its mouth. Frightened, the knight stopped in his tracks.

He had seen many dragons, but this one was unlike any other. It was huge, and the flames came not only from its mouth, as with any ordinary dragon, but also from its eyes and ears. And if that wasn't enough, the flames were blue, which meant that this dragon had a high butane content.

The knight reached for his sword, but his hand found nothing. He began to tremble. In a weak and unrecognizable voice, the knight asked Merlin for help, but, to his despair, the wizard did not appear.

* Why doesn't it come? - he asked anxiously, while dodging a blue flare from the monster.
* I don't know," replied Squirrel, "You can usually count on him.

Rebecca, sitting on the gentleman's man, tilted her head to one side and listened attentively.

* From what I've been able to pick up, Merlin is in Paris, attending a conference on wizards.

"He can't abandon me now," the knight said to himself. "He promised me there would be no dragons on the Path of Truth."

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

The situation looked serious. A dragon that could read minds was definitely the worst thing to expect but, s o m e h o w , the knight managed to stop trembling. In the loudest and most powerful voice he could, he shouted:

* Out of my way, you giant butane canister! The beast snorted, spewing fire in all directions.
* Gee, how daring the frightened kitten!

The gentleman, not knowing what else to do, tried to buy time.

* What are you doing in the Castle of Will and Daring? - he asked.
* Is there a better place for me to live? - I am the Dragon of Fear and Doubt.

The gentleman recognized that the name was very apt. Fear and doubt was exactly what he felt. The dragon vociferated again:

* I'm here to put an end to all the smartasses who think they can beat anyone simply because they've been through the Castle of Knowledge.

Rebecca whispered in the gentleman's ear:

* Merlin once said that self-knowledge could slay the Dragon of Fear and Doubt.
* And you think so? - he whispered to the gentleman.
* Yes - Rebeca affirmed firmly.
* Well, then, you take care of that green flamethrower! - The knight turned and ran across the drawbridge in retreat.
* Ho ho ho! - laughed the dragon, and with his last "ho" he almost burned the knight's pants.
* Are you retiring after having come so far? - asked Squirrel, while the knight shook the sparks off his back.
* I don't know," he replied, "I have become accustomed to certain luxuries, such as living. San intervened.
* How do you put up with yourself if you don't have the will and daring to test the knowledge you have of yourself?
* Do you also believe that self-knowledge can slay the Dragon of Fear and Doubt? - asked the knight.
  + Of course. Self-knowledge is truth and you know what they say: "the truth is mightier than the sword".
  + I know that's what they say, but is there anyone who has tried it and survived? - the gentleman asked subtly. As soon as he finished uttering these words, the gentleman remembered that he did not need to prove anything. He was good, generous and loving. Therefore, he should feel neither fear nor doubt. The dragon was

nothing but an illusion.

The knight looked across the bridge to where the monster was throwing fire into some bushes, apparently so as not to lose practice. With the thought in his mind that the dragon only existed if he believed it existed, the knight took a deep breath and slowly w a l k e d back across the drawbridge.

The dragon, of course, went to meet him, snorting and flaming. This time, however, the knight pressed on. But the knight's courage soon began to melt, as did his beard, in the heat of the dragon's flames. With a cry of fear and anguish, he turned and ran.

The dragon let out a mighty laugh and fired a stream of fire at the retreating knight.

With a howl of pain, the knight shot across the bridge, with Rebecca and Squirrel in his wake. Spotting a small stream, he quickly dipped his scorched backside into the cool water, smothering the flames on the spot.

Squirrel and Rebecca tried to comfort him from the shore.

* + You were very brave," said Squirrel.
  + Not bad for a first attempt," added Rebeca. Surprised, the gentleman looked at her from where he was.
  + What do you mean, the first attempt? Squirrel answered him matter-of-factly:
  + You will have better luck the second time The gentleman replied angrily:
  + You will go the second time.
  + Remember that the dragon is only an illusion," said Rebecca.
  + What about the fire coming out of his mouth? Is that also an illusion?
  + Indeed - answered Rebecca - the fire was also an illusion.
  + Then how come I'm sitting in this creek with my butt burned? - demanded the gentleman.
  + Because you yourself made fire real, you give it the power to burn your ass or anything else," said Squirrel.
  + You're right - corroborated Sam - You must go back and face the dragon once and for all.

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

As the knight struggled with flagging courage, he heard Sam say:

* + God gave courage to man. Man gives courage to God.
  + I'm sick of trying to understand the meaning of things. I'd rather just sit by the stream and rest.
  + Look - Sam encouraged him - if you confront the dragon, there is a chance that you will eliminate it, but if y o u don't confront it, it is certain that it will destroy you.
  + Decisions are easy when there is only one alternative - said the gentleman. He r e l u c t a n t l y stood up, took a deep breath and crossed the drawbridge once more.

The dragon looked at him in disbelief. He was a truly stubborn fellow.

* + Again? - he snorted - Well, this time I'm really going to burn you.

But this time the knight marching towards the dragon was another one; one who chanted over and over again: "fear and doubt are illusions".

The dragon launched gigantic flames at the knight again and again, but no matter how hard it tried, it could not make him burn.

As the knight drew closer, the dragon grew smaller and smaller, until it reached the size of a frog. Once its flame was extinguished, the dragon began to throw seeds. These seeds - the Seeds of Doubt - also failed to stop the knight. The dragon grew smaller and smaller as it continued to advance with determination.

* + I have won! - exclaimed the victorious knight. The dragon could hardly speak.
  + Maybe this time, but I'll be back again and again to block your path. Having said that, he disappeared with a burst of blue smoke.
  + Come back whenever you want - shouted the knight - Every time you do, I will be stronger and you weaker. Rebecca flew and landed on the gentleman's shoulder.
  + You see, I was right. Self-knowledge can slay the Dragon of Fear and Doubt.
* If you really thought it was yes, why didn't you accompany me when I approached the dragon? - asked the knight, who no longer felt inferior to his feathered friend.

Rebecca fluffed her feathers.

* I didn't want to interfere. It was your trip.

Amused, the knight reached out to open the castle door, but the Castle of Will and Boldness had disappeared! Sam explained:

* You don't have to learn about will and daring because you have just demonstrated that you already possess it.

The knight threw his head back, laughing with pure joy. He could see the top of the mountain. The path seemed even steeper than before, but it didn't matter.

He knew that nothing could stop him now.

# THE PEAK OF TRUTH

Inch by inch, inch by inch, the knight climbed, his fingers bloody from clinging to the sharp rocks. When he had almost reached the top, he came upon a boulder blocking his path. As always, there was an inscription on it: *though this Universe I possess, I possess nothing, for I cannot know the unknown if I cling to the known.*

The knight felt too exhausted to overcome the last obstacle. It seemed impossible to decipher the inscription and be hanging from the mountain wall at the same time, but he knew he had to try.

Squirrel and Rebecca were tempted to help him, but restrained themselves, for they knew that sometimes help can weaken a human being.

The knight took a deep breath, which cleared his mind a little. He read the last part of the inscription aloud: "For I cannot know the unknown if I cling to the known".

The gentleman reflected on some of the "known" things he had clung to throughout his life. There was his identity - who he thought he was and what he was not - There were his beliefs - what he thought was true and what he considered false - And there were his judgments - the things he held to be good and those he considered bad.

The knight looked at the rock and a terrible thought crossed his mind: he also knew the rock to which he was clinging to stay alive. Did the inscription mean that he should let go and let himself fall into the abyss of the unknown?

* You got it gentleman," said Sam, "You have to let go.
* What are you trying to do, kill us both? shouted the gentleman.
* In fact, we're already dying right now," said Sam, "Look at you. You're so thin you could slide under a door, and you're full of stress and fear.
* I'm not as scared as before - said the gentleman.
* In that case, let yourself go and trust -. Said Sam
* Trust who? - replied the gentleman angrily. He was fed up with Sam's philosophy.
* It's not a who - Sam replied - It's not a who but a what!
* A what? - asked the gentleman.
* Yes," said Sam, "Life, the force, the universe, God, whatever you want to call it.

The knight looked over his shoulder and saw the seemingly endless abyss below him.

* Let go," Sam whispered urgently.

The knight seemed to have no choice. He was losing strength with each passing second and the blood gushed from his fingers where they clung to the rock. Thinking he would die, he let go and plunged into the abyss, into the infinite depths of his memories.

He remembered 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 into the void, he let go of all the judgments he had made against them.

He fell faster and faster, dizzyingly, as his mind descended into his heart. Then, for the first time in her life, she contemplated her life with clarity, without judgment and without excuses. In that instant, he accepted full responsibility for his life, for the influence people had on it, and for the events that had shaped it.

From that moment on, outside of himself, he would never again blame anything or anyone else for all mistakes and misfortunes. The recognition that he was the cause, not the effect, gave him a new sense of power. He was no longer afraid.

An unknown sense of calm came over him and something very strange happened to him: he began to fall upwards! Yes, it seemed impossible, but he was falling upwards, emerging from the abyss! At the same time, he still felt connected to the deepest part of himself, to the center of the Earth. He continued to fall upward, knowing that he was united with the sky and the Earth.

Suddenly, he stopped falling and found himself standing on the top of the mountain and understood the meaning of t h e inscription on the rock. He had let go of all that he had feared and all that he had known and owned. His will to embrace the unknown had set him free. Now the universe was his, to be experienced and enjoyed.

The knight remained at the top, breathing deeply, and was overcome by an overwhelming sense of well- being. He felt dizzy with the enchantment of seeing, hearing and feeling the universe around him. Before, fear of the unknown had numbed his senses, but now he could experience everything with startling clarity. The warmth of the evening sun, the melody of the gentle mountain breeze and the beauty of the shapes and colors of nature that painted the landscape caused the knight indescribable pleasure. His heart overflowed with love: for himself, for Juliet and Christopher, for Merlin, for Squirrel and Rebecca, for life and for the whole wonderful world.

Rebecca and Squirrel watched the knight drop to his knees, tears of gratitude welling up in his eyes. "I almost died from all the tears I didn't shed," he thought. The tears were sliding down his cheeks, down his beard and down his breastplate. Because they came from his heart, they were extraordinarily warm, so that they did not

took a long time to melt what was left of his armor.

The knight wept for joy. Never again would he put on his armor and ride in all directions ever again. Never again would people see the bright reflection of steel, thinking that the sun was rising in the north or

setting in the west.

He smiled through his tears, oblivious to the fact that a new and radiant light was radiating from him; a light far brighter and more beautiful than that of his polished armor, a light sparkling like a stream, shining like the moon, dazzling like the sun.

BECAUSE NOW THE GENTLEMAN WAS THE STREAM. IT WAS THE MOON. HE WAS THE SUN. HE COULD BE ALL THINGS AT ONCE, AND MORE, BECAUSE HE WAS ONE WITH THE UNIVERSE.

IT WAS LOVE.

**FIN**