The Princess

Once upon a time, the wind heard a sigh of desire, and being a creature of longing itself, followed the sigh to a window of a castle wherein a princess sat dreaming. Her dreams were not the usual sifted sandbox of indulgence and fancy held by most. She dreamt of amazing people, open horizons, enchanted castles, and places only read about in books. Long ago, she had decided that once she was ready, she would visit many lands, learning about the lives of people and seeing all that the world had to offer.

This princess was not content to hear the stories of traveling knights and minstrels repeated in her father’s court. These stories often featured the knight or prince as the hero and rarely acknowledged the subtle power held by princesses. No, this princess wanted to see the deep woods with her own eyes, feel the grains of sand moving through her fingers on the beaches, and smell the wind coming from distant mountains. This princess was made of fire, passion, and freedom, and it was not within her to wait for the turning of a page to discover new experiences. She wished to leave the book behind and walk the road herself.

Luck and synchronicity often conspire around such people, and as a child, a traveling magician had taught the princess how to listen to the wind. She practiced diligently during her youth, and the wind, in turn, grew to like the princess and seek her out. She enjoyed the stories told by the wind even more than those at court, since the tales performed for the king usually served to flatter the person telling them. The wind had no such ambition, having meager concern for the desires of others, and would usually relate what it had witnessed directly, though not always truthfully. Truth, like ambition, was an alien concept to the wind, who preferred to tell things as they seemed and not precisely as they were. This habit sometimes led to the sorrow of the listener, including princesses.

One glorious afternoon, the princess stood on a hill near the castle, arms raised and eyes closed, feeling for the ripple of air that moved across the land. She breathed it in, taking in the stories it carried. On the wind were promises of adventure, tales of far-off deeds, and the slight smell of sausage and sour kraut from her father’s kitchens.

On that beautiful autumn day, she knew in her soul that it was finally time to leave. Bidding goodbye to her father, family, and friends, she saddled her horse Journey and left her home. With the sun on her back and the wind in her hair, she sought her life’s story, following the song of the land as it carried her onward.

She traveled far and wide, and her heart soared on wings of joy. Adventures, magical and terrifying, were hers for the asking. Some seemed made from the stuff of dreams, while others were fraught with peril, but she preferred even these frightening experiences to her quiet room and seat by the window. Indeed, on her road, she often found herself enamored by both the silly and the terrifying, as everything was new to her and she was still learning discernment. She knew how to find her path, but had not yet fully understood how to listen to her heart and was not entirely in control of her passions or interests.

One day, while sitting astride Journey and staring out across a vista of sparse fields, the wind pulled at her ear once more. It whispered of a faraway castle in which dreams were fulfilled, and all one had to do was stand inside its walls for wishes to come true. Tilting her head, she listened further, and to her joy, she discovered this magical castle needed a princess to rule over it.

Her imagination came alive with all the things she would wish into the world. Her heart began whispering to her, explaining that there was no such thing as a road free from problems or a choice without consequences. Her imagination was by far the louder of the two, and was already calling out possibilities and daydreams so grand that she ignored the warnings of her heart.

Imagining endless possibilities and, being a creature of freedom herself, she set out to find this magical kingdom that required a princess. She followed the whispers of the wind and the song of her imagination across the land. Though as she drew nearer to the promised castle and caught sight of it, she began to have doubts. She did not sense any freedom or fulfillment lurking in the walls of her new home. In fact, she thought she had never seen such a dismal and uninviting castle in all her many adventures.

“Maybe it is the lack of a princess that makes it look and feel so awful,” she whispered to herself.

This idea somewhat stilled her mind, but her heart would not be convinced. The wind had promised an adventure to surpass any other, but her heart saw into all things and knew that this castle was not a place it wanted to be. Having already survived many travails, however, the princess felt she was up to any challenge, and since the path forward was shorter than the way back, she was determined to see it through to the end.

She rode down the hill and across the grasslands. When she arrived at the imposing structure, she dismounted and studied the forlorn castle. It was a rather large affair, encircled by a moat, with a bridge leading across to a high wall. The wall held two massive doors that currently stood open, offering a partial view of a large and seemingly abandoned courtyard.

“With all this water, you would think someone would have washed the walls by now,” she muttered under her breath, eyeing the murky moat distrustfully. “My sister must work here for the place to be so unkempt.”

Remembering her sister, she quietly amended, “Though if she were here, there would be far more boys about and a lot less silence.”

She was talking to ease her nervousness, and she knew it. The castle seemed as though a bad memory had taken up residence, and she could not imagine how any building might hold the magic promised by the wind. As she peered closer, she could see that on the far side of the courtyard stood the keep itself. Two massive doors barred its entrance. Unlike the portal to the courtyard, these seemed securely shut, though she could not tell for sure from so far away. From the imposing keep, a single cylindrical tower protruded, piercing the sky as a lonely sentinel and standing silent watch over the entire affair.

“What a sad and lonely tower that is,” she mused to herself, “though I am sure if my sister were here, she would appreciate the construction.”

Since the mystery of the empty castle would not be solved by standing around throwing shade at absent family members, the princess walked her horse across the bridge, past the gatehouse, and into the courtyard. The stones of the wall and inner bailey were in good repair, though here and there she saw what looked like blackened soot from an old fire, now faded by wind and rain. No banners or tapestries fluttered from the walls. No soldier stood guard, and no attendant ran to meet her. The entire castle seemed utterly abandoned. The doors to the keep were the only things closed to her, so she walked across the courtyard for a better look.

Seeing no one about, she called out, but the echo of her voice was the only answer. She approached the massive doors and raised her hand to try the handle, but the eerie silence seemed to forbid her from acting. Her horse, picking up on the uneasy feeling in the courtyard, gently pulled at the reins in her hand as it began to snicker and dance. She imagined she could feel the quiet as a presence, waiting with hostile intent. In that awful nothingness, she was finally able to hear her heart speak clearly.

“How can an empty castle need anything, let alone a princess?” she whispered to herself as the fear began to mount.

Again, her heart warned her away, for it knew something wasn’t right. She was reluctant to be driven by the fear, but she also knew that there were some warnings one shouldn’t ignore. After a moment of further consideration, the princess decided she had seen enough of the lonely castle and that, even if given a hundred wishes, she would never want to call this place home. She turned away from the keep, regretting not having listened to her heart from the beginning.

No sooner had she started back across the courtyard than the massive doors burst open, and from the dark portal an enormous, scaled hand exploded forth. A gigantic dragon followed the hand out through the doors and into the sunlight. A wicked grin split its maw as it reached for the princess. In a fit of terror, Journey pulled free from her grasp and bolted for the bridge. The princess made to run as well, but the dragon’s arm snaked out, the fingers of its powerful claw wrapping around her and lifting her off the ground.

As fast as a rushing river, Journey cleared the bridge and was back into the grasslands. Realizing that it had forgotten its mistress, the horse rose onto its hind legs and turned about. Seeing her held aloft by the creature, Journey pranced in circles, pawing the earth with her hooves. Feeling that all had ended in tragedy, Journey surrendered to despair and ran from the castle, vanishing into the grasslands.

“At last!” roared the dragon in triumphant glee. “The final piece to my glory has arrived.”

Though the situation was grim, the princess was not to be undone so easily. The dragon held her in a tight grip, but she drew what breath she could and readied her magic. Most know of the magic of princesses, and all acknowledge the special power they have over creating good fortune for themselves, despite any situation. What most do not realize is that every princess is born with the power of a deep personal desire, and when they can weave this desire into their words and song, the unseen things of the world move around them to make it happen. If a princess is selfish or unkind, then those hardships will manifest in her life, and she will be unhappy. However, if a princess has a pure heart and intention, the unseen forces of the world will move to allow her on a path to love and freedom.

She knew her heart and the measure of herself, so she caught the dragon’s eyes with her own and began weaving her magic into her words. “What do you wish of me?” she asked with as much authority as she could manage.

This was no easy task while being held aloft by a creature much larger than herself, but she performed it well.

“Why, I wish to keep you here in my castle, of course,” the dragon said with a toothy grin. “Long ago, I conquered this castle, driving the knights who lived here to the four lands. I ate the king to shut him up and took his treasure for my own. His great hall is now my bed chamber, his many tapestries are my blankets, and the wealth his taxes stole from the working class of the country I now use to buy scratch-off lotto tickets.”

The dragon seemed very pleased with himself. He was also wary and turned his head slightly away while speaking, keeping the princess in his peripheral vision and never looking at her directly, for this dragon knew something of the magic of princesses.

“The king was without children,” he continued, “which meant I had no mighty prince to battle for glory. It also meant,” the beast continued, “that I had no princess to keep in my new tower. I waited years for a princess, but none came, and at last thought to ask the wind for a favor.”

The princess groaned inwardly, for now she understood what had happened. The fickle wind always enjoyed carrying messages, and though the wind itself was honest, it would happily pass along any story it came across without thought or care for the truth. The dragon must also know the magic of the wind to have been able to speak to it. He had summoned the wind, told it his lie, and the wind had agreed to carry it to the four lands. Realizing the dragon had some power of his own, the princess changed her tactics. Instead of commanding the creature, she tried to beguile it, for though magical in nature, the dragon still had the spirit of a beast, and she should be able to influence it.

“Oh, dragon, I see that your tower is indeed lonely, but surely you must know that the magic of princesses lies in their freedom. If you keep me here, I will not bring joy to your castle but rather become as lonely as this place.”

The dragon paused, and she began to hope to bring the beast under her sway. Conjuring forth the innocence of springtime and all the goodwill of the first day of summer, she patted one of the dragon’s giant knuckles and continued weaving her glamor over it.

“I cannot sing in such a home as this, and over time, I will grow as silent as the tower and as dark as the window that now stands empty. If you release me, then I shall continue my journey, and perhaps I will find a lady dragon in my travels. When I do happen upon someone to match yourself, I will tell her of you and your magnificent castle. Surely, this would be preferable to a wilted princess in a lonely window?”

To herself she muttered, “Though with how you treat women, it is only a matter of time before she locks you in the tower instead.”

Outwardly, the princess maintained her calm and poise. Seeing the dragon begin to wilt, she continued, “Would that arrangement, a lady dragon of your own, not be much better than a forlorn princess? A mate for you, suited to the life that you now live? Why, think of all the havoc you could wreak together across the countryside. Picking your teeth with the shards of splintered thrones, ravaging farmlands, and burning down toll plazas.”

The dragon blinked its eyes rapidly, and the princess dared to hope her will would carry the day. Sadly, it was not meant to be, for the dragon knew more of its nature than most, and shaking its head, it dispelled the images the princess’s words had conjured in its mind.

Coming back to itself, the dragon was indignant at the idea. “Why would I ever want to share my castle with another?” The dragon burst into laughter as if the very thought were ludicrous. “She would surely wait until I was off hunting and lock the door against me and claim it for her own.”

The dragon was so resolute that the princess believed this very thing may have happened in the dragon’s past.

“But what then will you do with me?” the princess asked, her distress showing plainly for the first time. She was more upset at the thought of her captivity than at her death, and knew that if she lost this battle, her freedom would be a long time in coming, if ever.

“Do with you?” asked the dragon. “Why nothing, save keep you in the tower for as long as you may draw breath.”

At this pronouncement, the princess started as if slapped in the face. A fae energy began to gather as her eyes narrowed and her fists gripped the dragon’s scaly knuckle. No longer afraid but affronted, a light all her own poured from her. An ominous and dangerous brilliance rolled forth as she once again caught the dragon’s eye. A fierce determination to never accept the cancerous thoughts of another as her story rose, and her voice carried with it the conviction of ages.

The stones themselves seemed to speak with her as she locked gazes with her captor. “Do what you will, dragon, but know that you shall not have me, for I am no one’s possession.”

With the dragon’s threat ringing in her mind, she took hold of herself and rallied her ultimate power. For if the words of a princess come from the heart, and are seated in truth, the world itself will work on her behalf to bring them about.

“I shall be free, and if I am ever bound, then it will be by my love.” The light shining from the princess began to pulse as she spoke her commands, “My love freely given, not in exchange for some service, but because those I give it to are worth loving. If you or any being stand in the way of this love, then may creation itself bind you and cast you down. This I swear by the love I have for myself and all free things.”

The dragon rocked backward and turned his face away. He held the princess as far away as he could without letting her go. Though his grip slackened under the power of her words, the dragon hardened his heart. He summoned all of the stubbornness, ill-will, and malice he could muster. Before he could hear any more from her, he spread his wings wide and flew up to the castle tower, tossing her quickly through the open window as if holding her had burned him.

Free from his clutches, the princess was finally able to draw in a deep breath and turned quickly to use her full power against the dragon. Just as quickly, the dragon pulled in his wings and fell back down to where he was far enough away to be free of her influence. Long he sat on the flagstones of the courtyard, gazing up at his new treasure. Though he had never before encountered such a mighty princess and had not been adequately prepared to resist her, he had won the battle and was pleased with himself and the crowning gem of his conquest.

For a long time, the princess stood on the balcony, gazing down upon him as well. Her poise held power and, in her eyes, was a promise to be kept.

The princess tried for days to concoct a way to set herself free. The dragon had been clever and had not left enough bedding of sufficient length to descend the steep walls if tied together. Nor was there anything to use as a ladder. The room did not contain enough furniture to throw to the base to jump down on, and the stones on her tower were so smooth she could not find even so much as a fingernail’s purchase with which to climb down. The door leading to the rest of the keep was firmly barred, and though she tried, she could neither push it open nor break it down. There was nothing within the apartment to use as an axe or ram, nor was there anything to start a fire, even had she desired to chance to burn herself with the door.

She sat on her bed to think, and think, and to think some more. Try as she might, no idea would come to her. She walked out to the balcony to stare out across at the freedom that had once been hers. She could feel the darkness beginning at the edges of her mind and struggled against it.

“I shall never give in to fear,” she thought to herself, “but from now on, I shall listen to my heart as well, for it does have good counsel.”

As she stood on the balcony staring out across the grass, the wind stirred her hair.

“Oh, leave me alone,” she groused to the wind, “you are as capricious as a handmaiden and twice the gossip.”

Still, it played with her hair and dress, for it was the nature of the wind not to be put off by harsh words. Then, the idea struck the princess that she could do as the dragon had done. The dragon had used the wind to call for a prisoner, so she would use it to call out for her freedom, but what to say? Remembering the stories she had heard as a child, the princess began to sing softly. She wove her story into the air, calling out to the dashing and the brave, the quick and the clever, the strong and bold. She wove all of these things into the wind and set it whirling forth in all directions to seek out whomever might hear her plea and come to assist in her freedom.

The wind eagerly did as asked. The two things it loved most in the world were magic and gossip, and having a new bit of each, it rushed to all four corners of the land, seeking out any ear that would listen.

All life is keen to the whisperings of princesses, but none more so than the ears of knights, with whom the words of a princess are as holy commandments. Once the voice of a princess is heard, a true knight will cast themselves against any obstacle, adversary, and distance to fulfill their quest. For it is the nature of knights to hurl themselves at stuff; the only thing they lack is a good excuse, and no greater excuse can be found than the call of a princess.

The wind sought and found three nights who could hear and heed the call, and eagerly, all three came as quickly as they could. They came from separate corners of the land, one astride a giant warhorse he had named Opportunity, for this was the knight of might and believed that all things were possible through strength. The wind found another moving quietly through the southern woods, holding to no map, for his memory was keen and his mind sharp. Beside him loped a great wolfhound, which he had named Will. This was the knight of mind, and he believed all things could be accomplished through clear and dedicated thinking. Lastly, out of the east, strode a valiant figure carrying a lute across his back. All who saw him would have taken him for a minstrel, save for the determination of his stride and the sword at his side. This was the knight of heart, and upon his shoulder perched a songbird he had named Desire, whose music was legendary. From the knight poured a song of carefree travels and adventure, and when Desire joined in the chorus, those who heard the song would be caught in its magic. Though not considered wise by any stretch of the imagination and lacking the brute strength associated with most knights, the knight of heart believed all things could be navigated by feeling. As such, he was content to exist as he chose, making up his verse and life as he went.

From three parts of the land, the knights came, each in their way, each following the wind and the call of the princess. Though coming from different directions, they arrived at the castle at the same time, for such is the way of magic. As each crested the rise, they beheld the bridge spanning the moat and the massive gate standing open before the courtyard. Each set their shoulders, jaws, and feet on the field of the forgotten castle with its lonely tower. As before, only the door to the keep itself remained shut, and they all wondered at the imposing structure as they eyed each other suspiciously. The wind had told of a captured princess and a desperate struggle, and the sight of the unguarded keep unnerved them a little.

The dragon had long ago ceased fearing any retribution for his theft and worried more about the sunlight interfering with his nap than unwanted visitors.

The knight of heart entered the valley and approached the bridge a moment before the others, as the heart usually leads the way in such matters. Next came the knight of mind, the knight of might bringing up the train. They made their way across the grasslands until all three stood before the bridge. Looking up, they surveyed the castle and then each other. On each face was etched the realization that the battle would not be just between one knight and a dragon. This was a puzzle to be pondered, as the code of chivalry did not include what to do if three knights showed up at the same time for the same princess.

True, there had been occasions where knights had worked together, but that had always been when there was more than one foe to vanquish and more than one area to explore. In those situations, one knight would take the haunted forest, one the graveyard, another a dangerous cave, and so on, until the goal had been achieved. In those stories, there was only one victor at the end, the rest having either died a suitably honorable death or found an individual path leading to an unforeseen fortune. In those tales, there were many foes to conquer, but all of the great stories had only one true champion and one evil more monstrous than the rest.

In their long trek to the castle, each had envisioned himself as the hero, a beautiful and thankful princess swooning over his manly qualities and falling instantly in love with him, her adoring eyes forever turned in his direction. Never once had they envisioned another knight with whom to contend.

Warily, each made their way down to the moat, eyeing the castle and each other in turn. Finally, as they arrived at the entrance of the bridge, they began to speak to one another, for it was clear that no one knew what to do in the present situation.

The introductions were awkward, and before anyone else could voice a claim, the knight of heart declared, “I claim the chance to go first. I crested the rise and beheld the castle before any other. Being the first to arrive, I should be first across the bridge, through the courtyard, and into the castle to battle with whatever may be waiting there.”

“It does not matter,” declared the knight of might. “For it is obvious we have all arrived together.”

Eying the other two disparagingly, he continued, “Equally obvious to me is that of everyone present, I am by far the most suited for this quest.” He gave a meaningful glance at the small frame of the knight of heart and the puny biceps of the knight of mind. He gripped the reins of his horse even harder, flexing his heavily muscled arms a few times to prove the point. “Therefore, I should be allowed to give the first challenge and claim my prize. Stay on this side of the bridge with your dog and parakeet, and I shall go forth to glorious battle. You will be safe behind me.”

His pretense of chivalry did nothing to hide the disdain in his voice as he said, “Besides, neither of you has so much as a proper mount.”

At this, the night of heart bristled. “I am sure you mount your horse every night…”

“If the wind is to be believed,” interrupted the knight of mind, “then there is only one princess and only one dragon, and three of us.” He spoke with such intelligence and discernment that the other two ceased their argument. “That there may be only one Princess seems right since there is only one tower to the castle.”

Having gained their attention and their silence, the knight of mind paused to reinforce the image of his leadership. Making his best effort to appear contemplative and confident, he continued, “It is obvious to me that we three should face the dragon together, and after the beast is vanquished, we shall let the princess choose from the surviving victors.”

The knight of mind did indeed have a keen intellect, and like many intellectuals, he believed it made him superior to others. He could not quite hide the subtle egoism that this trait produced in him, and as such, he worried first and foremost for himself. After all, the world was full of princesses, but there was only one of him. The knight of mind knew that with all three of them together, he stood the least chance of being hurt. He also thought highly enough of himself to believe that the princess would surely choose him over the meathead or the sopping heart.

While the knights engaged with each other outside the castle, the dragon stirred from where he lay sleeping in the great hall. He was not sure at first what had disturbed his dreams, but he thought he could’ve sworn he heard voices. Cautiously, he uncoiled his massive bulk and opened the doors of the great hall ever so slightly. With one enormous eye, he peered out across the courtyard and bridge, where, to his dismay, he saw the three knights deep in conversation.

Overcoming his immediate shock at such a host arrayed on his doorstep, the dragon crouched down to observe the three. After listening to the knights discuss his imminent harassment and possible death, he quickly realized the severity of his situation. The great knight astride the warhorse intimidated him a little, but he felt that if alone and in the open, he could best that one. Should they all face him together as the smaller knight suggested, he knew he could be vanquished. Although he had conquered his fair share of the metal-suited morons, he had always relied on surprise and cunning as his preferred methods of attack. The insistence of most knights to keep the rules of chivalry made the shiny idiots easy prey to duplicity. Even with guile and cunning, though, the smallest of them could be troublesome, and he wanted no part of a fair battle.

He listened for a time, thinking furiously, and considered what weaknesses might be exploited and how best to capitalize on them. The dragon knew he needed to act before the knights came to a decision. He was sure he would not escape this situation without a fight and was equally sure he did not want to give up his princess, having just caught one. He decided that he needed to fight them one at a time and that the silly night with the bird would be the easiest to overcome. The knight with the dog he thought to challenge second if he could manage it, for he intended to drown him and his dog in the moat. The knight with the horse would be hardest, but if he could take flight and lead that one onto the grasslands outside of the keep, he may indeed overcome the shiny hulking lug.

It would be difficult to get them to agree to single combat, for he was a great dragon, and when seen in full, he was a terrifying sight to behold. Indeed, the relentless way the princess had tried to best him deeply disturbed the dragon, for usually, mortals fell to the ground in terror upon seeing him. He was sure it was the princess who had somehow summoned these three, and as such, he was wary. Her power was great, and she would summon an equally great host to her side.

As none of the knights present had seen him yet, the dragon thought that if he kept the majority of his bulk in the castle, he might be able to convince them to give their word of fair combat before realizing he was a great dragon. He would have to work very hard to overcome the big one, but he did not acquire his castle and princess by being timid, and was willing to take chances when the situation required it.

Thus decided, the dragon hunched himself down as small as he could, stooping his shoulders and trying his hardest to make himself look meek. Slowly, he opened the great doors and crawled out of the hall and into the courtyard. Putting a slight limp in his walk and leaving as much of his bulk as he could inside the castle, he stopped just in front of the gate to the courtyard, ready to slam it shut upon the knights if they decided to charge all at once.

“Knights!” he whimpered, affecting a sickly and subdued tone.

They gave a very satisfactory start, so deep had they been in their argument, none had seen him cross the courtyard. The dragon realized he had missed an excellent opportunity for surprise, but he was already committed to his plan and pressed on.

“Why have you come to my castle?” he asked, trying his best to seem as if he suffered from a cold or some crippling malady.

The knights, embarrassed at being caught off guard, puffed and preened.

“You know why we have come!” cried the knight on the horse, “for we have heard the desperate pleading of fair princess and have come to answer her call.”

The dragon smiled inwardly, knowing the flowery language of the knights to mean that they were gullible twits bound by rules of conduct. Along with his natural propensity for bravado, the knight of might also had a keen eye and thus had noticed the princess emerge onto the balcony. Realizing he was on display before the prize, he was laying it on as thick as he could. While he spoke, he imagined her swooning posture and loving gaze upon viewing his manly splendor.

The knight of mind, also noticing the princess, quickly realized that the contest had already begun. Not to be outdone by the lump on the horse, he was eager to show courage in the face of the dragon.

“Aye, fell beast,” he cried, keeping an eye on the tower to see what effect his words were having, “you know the evil which you have done, and you see the justice that is come. Release her now, and you may yet save your hide.”

The knight of mind made his statements boldly, though, in truth, he did not want to fight the dragon, having dealt with their kind before and knowing them to be almost as smart as he.

The knight of heart was not as observant as the other two, though following their glances upward, he eventually spied the figure in the tower. Viewing the princess at last, his heart swelled with joy and longing. Quickly, he unslung the lute from his back and began plucking notes. Sweetly, he sang, and the songbird on his shoulder joined in.

His words were directed towards the princess, and he wove the magic of his craft into them. A soliloquy, a sonnet, a hymn, and a limerick flowed forth freely from his fingers, all catching into the air as they drifted up to the princess. The princess, for her part, listened to the melody, as it was sweet and filled with enticing promises and longing kisses. However, in the countermelody, she heard the knight’s love for himself and his own voice rather than any true promise of freedom.

As she listened, she couldn’t help but feel that a statue or a painting propped up in her place would have gotten the same response from each of the three. However, her plan had worked, and the door stood open before her. Regardless of the characters assembled in the doorway, her heart acknowledged the bravery and commitment of the knights, and she was grateful for their assistance.

The knight of heart droned on, his songbird now in full swing on the chorus. The dragon and the other two knights had stopped listening somewhere along the third stanza, and finally, the dragon interrupted with a belch and a snort of acrid smoke from his nostrils. The sulfuric fumes choked the songbird, who immediately began coughing. The knight of heart faltered, his voice trailing mid-verse as he gazed, annoyed at the dragon.

“Very well then, Dragon,” he cried, “if it’s a fight you want, then it’s a fight you shall have.” And holding his lute high, he cried out. “I shall be the first to face you. And I care not what these two do.”

“Hold,” cried the dragon, “for if there is to be a contest, there needs to be rules, as you well know, sir knight.”

This gave the knights pause, for they all knew the code of chivalry, though many of their order were just as quick to ignore it when no one was looking. They were shocked and a little dismayed that a dragon should know it as well and bring it to bear upon them.

“Continue,” said the knight of mind warily.

The dragon could feel the beginnings of a toothy grin at the corners of his mouth and pushed on before it had a chance to show, “This contest may be considered unfair, with three fighting only one, and so I hereby challenge each of you to single combat here upon this field. If you accept this challenge and you vanquish me, you may present yourself before the princess. Whichever you be left standing, if any, may claim her as your prize.”

The dragon’s words had turned from wheedling to flowery, and they flowed as smoothly as the scales on his backside.

The knight of might harrumphed and clattered his shield upon his breastplate. “Speak whatever terms you will,” he cried to the dragon, “we will meet you, and I shall go first!”

So saying, he drew his sword, the weapon making a deep rasping sound as it slid free of its sheath. He was about to charge across the bridge when the wails of his fellow knights brought him up short.

The knight of mind, his thoughts racing, jumped in front of the warhorse. Raising his hands high, he stood between the soon-to-be combatants and cried out, “The knight of heart has already claimed primacy, being that he was first to lay eyes upon your castle. I was second,” he continued, “so I shall go next. This slab of muscle here shall be for you if we shall fail.”

Inwardly, the knight of mind was rejoicing, for he had been concocting a plan as the dragon was speaking and had already thought of a way in which to cross the bridge safely, regardless of the condition the knight of heart left the dragon in. He felt sure the knight of heart would fail, for he had accurately deduced that it was a great dragon they faced. He also had no illusions about the dragon keeping his word, but the knight of mind thought that he would be within the castle by the time the dragon had bested the other two, and in a far better place to defend himself. With luck, he thought the great beast would be in no condition to fight him for the princess.

Turning first to the dragon and then to his fellow knights, he struck his best negotiator pose. “May I suggest the terms?” Seeing no one object, he continued, “I say that we keep the contest simple. We knights will divide into three groups and take turns getting past you and gaining the castle. If any standing here should gain entrance to the keep, you are vanquished, and they the victor.”

The dragon grinned a toothy grin, for this was precisely what he had planned, and it was the silly knight who suggested it! “Accepted,” he roared.

And so saying, pulled the rest of his bulk free from the castle. He had lived a long life and was a massive coil of terror. His claws gouged deep furrows into the granite of the courtyard as he peered past the bridge to where they stood at the gatehouse.

“Come then. It has been a long time since I tasted canned meat.”

The knight of heart was not ruffled in the slightest, for he had faced dragons before and heard their taunting. Though his heart was large, his mind was small, and such insinuations left no impression on it whatsoever. He again reached for his lute and began playing a sweet melody, one not aimed at the princess but tied to the wind itself. For the knight of heart also knew the ways of the wind, the heart often being just as fickle. So, in good company, the heart and the wind journeyed across the drawbridge, as the songbird on his shoulder began to weave its song into the refrain. Little did anyone suspect, but the songbird was not an ordinary bird at all. It was itself a creature of magic the knight had freed from a wizard's cage long ago. In gratitude, the bird followed the knight, lending the power of its magic to whatever words the knight spoke. Despite his size and temperament, this was how the heart managed, in its way, to be most powerful of all.

Slowly, gently, and sweetly, the knight of heart wove his song into the wind, and the wind obligingly carried it to the pointed ears of the dragon. The dragon, once proud and dangerous, began to wilt, ever so slightly at first, and then visibly drooped as the song continued. The head, perched upon its long, sinuous neck, rocked gently back and forth, its eyes lowered, and smoke ceased pouring from its nostrils. Slowly, the great head lowered down to the cobblestones, where it settled with a long sigh.

The knight of heart, songbird on his shoulder, walked across the drawbridge, playing boldly and sweetly, his songbird piping in as the perfect moment. With even, measured tread, he passed through the gatehouse and, still singing, stepped lightly around the dragon and across the courtyard until he was at last standing inside the keep. Only then did he finish his final note, the songbird growing silent as well.

Slowly, the dragon came back to himself and, blinking rapidly, stared all about him. To his mind, it seemed that the knight had disappeared from before his very eyes.

“Behind you,” laughed the knight of heart. “Here I am.”

The great dragon whirled around and was about to let forth a fiery blast when the songbird screeched, startling the dragon and bringing him up short.

“The deal,” said the knight of heart, “was that if any could gain access to the keep, you would be vanquished. Here I stand, and you are vanquished.”

With this, he played one chord upon his lute. And the chord pulled at the dragon’s mind. With a cold shudder that began at the point of spiky tail and ran up his ridged spine, the dragon knew he was beaten. Even if he could strike quickly and true, the two Knights behind him would be upon him in a flash for breaking the terms of the contest, and he now had knights before as well as behind.

Grimly, he lowered his head in acquiescence. “As you command,” he said, silently promising himself that he would best the last two knights, plug his ears with cotton, and then roast the bird upon a spit while the knight watched.

The great dragon turned back to the drawbridge. “Very well,” he said, “two remain. Come on then,” and eying the dog, he sneered, “I can always use a new throw rug.”

This time, he moved his bulk outside of the gate, just in front of the drawbridge, and onto the piece of land between the moat and the wall that circled outside the castle. He was determined that no knight would sneak past him again.

The knight of mind looked down at his companion and winked. Slowly, the knight left the bridge and began pacing around the moat opposite the dragon. The dragon followed him first with his eyes and then with his great, heaping body. He recognized the keen intelligence in the knight of mind and the fire that burned behind his thoughts. Slowly, the knight walked around the castle on his side, keeping careful watch as the dragon paced him on the other side of the moat. He seemed as if he was searching for a way past the great beast and over the wall itself. Slowly, the dragon continued to match him until at last they had made a complete circuit around the castle.

“Very well,” cried the knight of mind upon returning to the bridge. “I have won, and you are vanquished.”

“What nonsense is this?” cried the dragon, “you haven’t made it anywhere! You haven’t even crossed the bridge.”

“Not so,” said the knight of mind cheerily. “Look behind you.”

Fearing a trap, the dragon warily turned and looked behind him and saw, to his great shock and dismay, the wolfhound sitting inside the keep, tongue lolling in a toothy grin.

“That is not fair,” cried the dragon, “you didn’t pass into the keep, only that mutt, and if it makes a mess inside my home, I’ll use your helmet to scoop it up.”

Hearing this, the wolfhound lowered its head and began to growl ominously. Seeing the animal had understood and remembering the power of the songbird, the dragon quickly reevaluated his situation. In consternation, he turned back to the knight facing him. “You haven’t won a thing,” he said stubbornly.

“Not so,” cried the knight of mind, “for you should have been more specific in our deal. The rules of the contest were that if one of us standing here crosses the bridge and enters the keep, then you are vanquished. You do not specify it must be a knight, and so there my wolfhound sits.”

So saying, the knight of mind strolled casually onto the drawbridge past the dragon and into the keep to stand beside the knight of heart and his loyal companion.

Now, the dragon gnashed his teeth, for he was in an even worse situation, with knights on each side and two inside the keep. Turning his head back, he stared warily at the knight of might, who had already lowered his visor and held his sword. So garbed, he was indeed an ominous sight for the dragon to behold. At that moment, the dragon knew he was defeated. Even if he could manage to best this knight, he knew he would be too wounded to reclaim his castle from those who already stood inside.

In bitter disappointment, he lowered his head before the knight of might, sullenly announcing. “I yield, take your prize.”

The knight was fond of decapitation, and in different circumstances, may have taken the dragon’s head and acted as if he hadn’t heard the surrender. But by using that phrase in front of the other two knights and the princess, the dragon had guaranteed that he could no longer be harmed.

With a grinding of teeth, the Knight of Might grudgingly touched the top of the dragon’s head with his sword. “I accept your surrender,” he said sourly. Realizing the battle was far from won, he stared down his two persistent rivals as he rode his horse across the drawbridge.

The dragon noticed that small ripples seemed to spread from where the horse’s hooves touched the ground.

“Great,” the dragon whispered to himself. “How did each of these fools come by a magic creature to serve them?”

“What did you say, beast?” roared the night as he passed, turning abruptly and clearly eager for a fight.

“I am only admiring the horse’s backside that passes me, your grace. For it is by far the greatest and most well-formed I have ever seen, and clearly took much practice in becoming so.”

The knight of might glanced down at his noble steed and patted Opportunity fondly. “Yes,” he stated with bursting pride. “We both exercise four hours a day, and spend another hour in front of the mirror perfecting our form. I don’t even use camera filters on my profile pics.”

Inside the castle, the knight of mind snickered, the bird coughed out something that sounded like ‘brisket,’ and the princess inwardly groaned.

The dragon, now safe from harm and glad for his life, was abysmally upset that he had lost another home, and this time not even in divorce court. Still, he was slightly curious about what might happen next, for all three knights remained, and only one princess.

“Dragon,” cried the knight of might, “in your parley, I command you, fly to the tower and bring down the beautiful princess so that she may choose me and we can leave this dreadful place.”

Not wanting to appear meek, the other two knights chimed in, “Yes, dragon, go and set free our fair princess!”

“Very well,” grumbled the dragon, and spreading his great wings, he flew up to the tower and extended his hand, this time, palm open.

The princess climbed upon it and stood proudly as the dragon hovered back to the courtyard. Calmly, she stepped down and moved to stand in front of the three knights. She eyed each before eventually turning to the dragon. Graciously, she nodded her thanks to the creature for releasing her from the tower.

Turning to face the nights once more, she studied them. Looking first to the knight of might, she spoke, “I thank you for your daring,” she looked at the knight of mind, “for your cleverness,” she looked at the knight of heart, “and for your love.”

Keeping her eyes on the knight of heart, she continued, “But this is a difficult decision, for the heart, though strongest of all, without compassion and temperance, only knows what it desires and cannot see the desires of others.”

“And the mind,” she said, turning to the Knight of Mind, “in its lofty ideals and its clever creations, still, without joy, has nothing.”

“And though strength and power for the body are indeed great for changing the world,” she said, turning to the knight of might, “if its only purpose is for the effect that it can have, and lacks an understanding of what it has been given, it becomes cruel and callous.”

“So, though each of you has your virtue,” she acknowledged, “with each choice comes something I must sacrifice in return,” she considered quietly, looking down to the courtyard. It seemed as if she was speaking to herself when she continued, “In this choice, I may simply be trading one tower for another.” She paused, and all present looked on in confusion. Even the knight of mind seemed perplexed at her words, and all appeared as if they wished she would get on with it. “Very well,” she said, looking up, her back straight and her head held high. She announced her verdict, “All present, close your eyes, and whomever I touch will be the one I choose.”

Even the dragon closed his eyes with the rest, as each knight waited to feel the gentle touch of the princess. The knight of might, sure that it was him, smiled broadly and flexed his biceps so that they would feel rock solid when the touch came.

The knight of mind, congratulating himself for being so clever in front of the woman he imagined was even in that moment swooning in admiration, could not keep the smirk off his face when thinking about how jealous the two standing beside him would be when they finally had to recognize his superiority.

The knight of heart had already composed three soliloquies, a sonnet, a limerick, and a wedding proposal, and was waiting for the touch before he could pour them forth, taking the stage so that all present could marvel at his creativity and passion.

All three were startled then when the sound of a galloping horse thundering its way across the courtyard shattered the silence. Four pairs of eyes flew open, and three mouths exclaimed loudly in surprise.

At the cries of the knights, the princess, now astride the great warhorse and past the gate, turned around upon the bridge and reared up as she had long ago when first approaching the castle. “I choose this one, whom I have touched first.” She called back to them. “For though I had the will,” she said, looking at the wolfhound beside the knight of mind, “and though I had the desire,” she said, looking at the songbird perched upon the knight of heart’s shoulder, “what I lacked was Opportunity,” she said, patting the horse’s flank. “And I thank you for providing that to me,” she grinned, nodding to the knight of might.

So speaking, she turned her horse and galloped off over the horizon and into the setting sun as the dragon laughed and laughed.