

The Town Drunk

Presents

The Curse of the Friendly Forest

Rod M. Santos

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Sir Duncan entered the Forest of Friendliness under a full moon. The whorled faces of the magic trees greeted him with bright, goofy smiles... which faltered before Sir Duncan's desperate stare.

A merrijay, which local wisdom held as the friendliest of birds, flew towards the young knight. When it spied his ragged beard and haggard eyes, the bird twittered nervously and continued past, pretending it never meant to alight his shoulder in the first place.

Sir Duncan sighed, and prayed he would find the Bright Lady in time.

He approached the nearest oak. "Can you help me?" he asked.

The tree smiled vacantly.

A bit thick-sapped, the knight thought. "Can... you... help... me?" he asked again.

When the oak's expression didn't change, Sir Duncan went to the next, but it proved no more talkative than the first. After several futile inquiries, he trudged on.

He wandered, lost, and with each step his hope died a little more. "Can no one aid me?" he yelled. "I seek the Bright Lady."

An apple fell on his head with a loud "bonk." He looked up but found no one in the boughs above him. A short distance away, another apple fell. When he stooped to pick it up, yet a third hit the ground nearby.

He didn't bother to pick up the fourth, but followed the direction he was being led. The path took him to a fragrant grove carpeted with orange flowers that glowed under the moonlight. His breath caught at the beauty.

The forest air began to shimmer like a cloud of drunken fireflies. His heart swelled, for he had come seeking refuge in the Bright Lady's woods, and at last, she was appearing. The fairy's

translucent silhouette, sparkling in gold, took shape.

He fell to his knees. When she spoke, her voice piped like the wind's laughter.

“Welcome to my Home, the Forest of Friendliness, and may Peace track you down like a hunter, run you through with the spear of Tranquility, and skin you for a fuzzy cloak that warms the soul with *Love*.”

“Bright Lady, I have come—”

“*Love*, like raging flames that roast you alive while you shriek in bliss as your skin bubbles and... oh darn, where was I?” The fairy scratched her head.

“Bright Lady, I seek haven in your holy forest.”

“Then haven I grant you for as long as you wish. Gorge on the fruits of joyful Joy until you choke.”

Sir Duncan waited. After a moment's silence, he thought it safe to continue. “For long months have I traveled—”

The Bright Lady spun about like a giddy tornado. “Joy that flitter-flutters on wings of Hope that combusts with the splendor of—*cough, cough*.”

She snapped her fingers, and a golden cup of water appeared. She drank noisily, then paused to catch her breath.

Sir Duncan dove into the silence. “My Lady, you have my thanks. I have spent months fleeing my dark foe, the Ebon Knight, who even now seeks to slay me.”

The Bright Lady gulped one last swallow of faerie water, then threw the golden cup into some bushes. “Let no troubles touch you here. Exile your worries for in the Forest of Fr—*Did you just say ‘my dark foe, the Ebon Knight’?*”

“Indeed, Bright Lady.”

“Surely you do not mean *the* Ebon Knight?”

“Yes.”

“Tall? Barbed armor? Likes children? Usually with cranberry sauce?”

“The very one.”

“And he's following you here? To my woods?”

“This very moment.”

“HmMMMM.”

Sir Duncan took off his helm and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“I would love to put you up for the night,” the Bright Lady said, “but I’m afraid my Forest will be crowded this evening. Druid convention, wouldn’t you know?”

“Your forest is vast, and I am but one man. I can find shelter by the roots of some dogwood or sleep by some gentle brook.”

“Surely you missed the ‘No Vacancies’ sign in the front.”

“This is a forest, my Lady. I am uncertain it *has* a front.”

“Yet clearly I remember climbing my silver stepladder and placing a par-ti-cularly large sign betwixt an ancient oak’s branches. ‘No Vacancies.’ We’re all booked, I’m afraid.”

Sir Duncan looked around. “With utmost respect, I see none besides ourselves.”

Her finger jabbed the air. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“But what of your words of welcome and haven, of fluttering joy and puppies?”

“I didn’t mention puppies.”

“Are you sure?” Sir Duncan asked, confused.

“Very much so.”

“Forgive me. Amidst the multitude of words, I assumed puppies had found their way in there somewhere.”

“Nope, no puppies and *No Vacancies*. Now off, off with you. Try finding haven in the Happy Hillocks with the Celestial Princess... hillocks being a double entendre, so I’ve heard.”

She dematerialized into dizzy lights, then into darkness made even gloomier by the recent brilliance.

Sir Duncan hid his face in his hands and began to weep, an act quite unbecoming for a knight and which only deepened his despair. As for the Happy Hillocks, he would never make it in time. Soon the Ebon Knight would find him; soon the final blow in their battle would be struck.

It had been a fool's quest trying to avenge his grandfather, who had died long ago under the Ebon Knight's blade. Duncan knew he was outmatched the first time he'd crossed swords with his enemy.

Death would have claimed him that day, but for a fortuitously placed pile of pig manure. As his foe set up for the fatal lunge, he slipped on the pile, quite ignominiously. Sir Duncan took that brief respite to run. He had not stopped running since.

A few minutes into his weeping, the air shimmered again.

"Welcome to my Home, the Forest of Friendliness, and may Peace track—*You?* You're still here?"

Sir Duncan turned to hide his face.

"And are those... tears?" It was the Bright Lady's turn to hold her head. "If there's one thing my heart has no shield against, it's tears. A man's weapon, I call them." She sighed with resignation. "Very well, you may stay one night, but don't expect me to pick up a sword and slay him for you. I'm *not* that kind of Lady."

Sir Duncan was unsure what she meant, so he simply bowed.

"Go rest up in the trees," she said.

"I thank you, most gracious Lady."

"Tut, tut, none of that. Just wipe those infernal tears. Likely the Ebon Knight won't even make it here... probably get lost between the Mirthful Mountains and the Canyon of Contentment."

To Sir Duncan, the words rang like those of a mother telling her child there were no such things as monsters. A pity he knew better.

The ground shook beneath the thundering hooves of a hellborn stallion. Flowers withered, grass withered, and, given the choice, the rocks would have withered as well. It was deep past midnight when the Ebon Knight entered the Forest of Friendliness.

He rode slowly—a menacing trot really—with the dark padding confidence of a tiger.

When he stopped by a large clearing, the air before him tingled, wavering like an indecisive child. A swarm of sparkles congregated. He squinted at the brightness of the shape that formed.

"Welcome to my home and—*Eeeekkkk...* ah-ahem, that is to say, be now at Peace for I am the Bright Lady and—"

I CARE NOT WHO YOU ARE. I HAVE COME FOR THE KNIGHT NAMED DUNCAN. TONIGHT HIS BLOOD SHALL BATHE MY SWORD, AND HIS SCREAMS SHALL FLEE ME INTO DARKNESS.

“Okay, no small talk. You know, you’re actually poetic in a macabre sort of way.”

The Ebon Knight dismounted the fiery stallion. It raced away from him, trailing a withered path behind it.

The Bright Lady scratched her chin. “Did you know your horse is on fire?”

BRING THE KNIGHT HERE OR I SHALL SLAY ALL LIFE WITHIN THESE WOODS.

The Bright Lady cleared her throat and straightened. She had practiced her speech for over two hours.

“Search not for Sir Duncan, for he is not hiding here in my woods, nor would he involve me in the middle of some personal, *private* dispute, but if he did, you should not take it, in any way or by virtue that he and I spoke together, that I am allying myself against you; all of which is moot since I never spoke to him, and he is not here. In my woods.”

The Ebon Knight responded with a dark, brooding silence. His first mistake.

“Because, as you should know,” the Bright Lady continued, “I have no love for violence. I am the patroness of pacifism, the queen of concord, the champion of cheh... chee... choo... can I have some help here?”

BE SILENT.

“Oh, I can be silent, like weary light from a sleepy star. Or quiet as a starving mouse—no, not starving per se because its stomach might grumble. Let’s say a very, very emaciated mouse. On its tippy-toes.”

YOU WILL... CEASE... YOUR NATTERING!

“Incredible! You broke out of that hollow, pervading monotone. Your voice could drive someone up the wall, you know, what with no inflections or accents. Have you ever tried speaking with an accent?”

The Ebon Knight threw a punch, but his gauntleted fist went through her as if she were hot air. He roared in frustration. Lifting his two-handed sword, its black metal strewn with fiery sigils, he swung at a large, nearby oak. The single continuous stroke sliced the magnificent tree in twain. The top half toppled to reveal rings and raw wood flowing with dark sap.

“You treecapitated Woodrow! You beast! A plague on your castle, you dark Lumberjack from Hell!”

The Ebon Knight strode to the next tree and swung again. The tree fell, but this time a Sir Duncan-sized object fell with it... right atop the Ebon Knight.

With the creaking of armor, the two combatants rolled to their feet. The Ebon Knight appeared dazed but quickly recovered.

AT LAST, THE CRAVEN APPEARS, NO LONGER TO HIDE LIKE A FRIGHTENED HARE.

Sir Duncan knew he was right. The time for running was long past.

His foe paused to scan the ground. GOOD. NO PIG DROPPINGS.

It was too dark for Duncan to see, but he knew he would never be that lucky again.

PREPARE YOURSELF. MY SWORD CLAIMS TWO VICTIMS THIS NIGHT—YOURSELF AND THE FOOLISH DREAM OF AVENGING YOUR GRANDFATHER.

The Bright Lady screeched, “You’ve *already* killed twice tonight. My poor, poor trees. Get him, Sir Duncan! Avenge poor Woodrow and Barkley and end this baleful blight, this botanical butcher whose wickedness is a woodpecker, peck-a-peck-pecking on my soul.”

Sir Duncan spared a swift glance to find an audience of forest animals around the grove’s shadowy fringes. Bucks and quails, squirrels and quick red foxes all blinked the sleep from their eyes as they gathered to witness the battle. Even the merrijay was there, tweeting fretfully.

The Bright Lady was practically dancing now. Her fists flurried in outrage, showering golden sprinkles into the air. “Knee him where it hurts, good knight!”

But in that one battle they’d fought and in all the tales he’d heard, Sir Duncan had discovered no weakness in his enemy, no flaw to maneuver or fault to manipulate.

“I shall never give up,” Sir Duncan whispered to himself. As his grandfather had always taught him, *Surrender is just defeat plus laziness.*

SOME ADVICE, ‘GOOD KNIGHT’—A SUFFICIENTLY PATHETIC DISPLAY OF GROVELING MAY EARN YOU A SWIFT DEATH.

Sir Duncan charged. “Have at thee, foul one!”

For the briefest of moments, the Ebon Knight was driven back. Sir Duncan’s ferocity was a weapon of its own, fueled by rage, ignited by desperation.

The Bright Lady shouted her best advice. “Quick, to the left, no, right, *my* right. Wait till he

swings, pretend you're dead, NOW, too slow, hit him, *hit him*, HIT HIM!"

Sir Duncan found he fought better doing the opposite of the Bright Lady's advice. But in the end, he knew it would not matter. Time was ever on the Ebon Knight's side; he did not age and, worse, he did not tire.

The heavy clang of swords was soon joined by an altogether different sound. The Ebon Knight's hollow laughter rumbled in his suit of armor, rumored to be devoid of any body within. It was a sound that choked hope.

Sir Duncan's attacks began to slow, his parries to slacken. Finally the Ebon Knight's sword arced down and shattered Sir Duncan's blade. The falling steel fragments caught the light off the Bright Lady and twinkled on the ground like broken stars.

Sir Duncan fell to one knee. He had been disarmed, defeated, and would soon be beheaded. He tensed for a final blow that did not come. When he looked up, he realized his foe had paused to gloat.

POOR FOOL. YOUR GRANDFATHER WOULD BE SHAMED AT HOW EASILY YOU WERE BESTED.

The Ebon Knight towered like a monument to Sir Duncan's failure. The parts of the villain's face not covered by his dark helmet were veiled in shadow. Even so, Sir Duncan could sense the malevolent grin, a grotesque expression of malignant glee, glee like an unlit-

He shook his head to clear it, aware that even his brief time with the Bright Lady had affected him. And from that awareness... inspiration struck.

He bent his head. "Be done, miscreant, and make an end of it."

The Ebon Knight lifted his sword with an executioner's practiced poise.

"I know how little life means to you," continued Sir Duncan. "I should have known how little the curse would mean as well."

The Ebon Knight halted, his swordstroke at its apex.

WHAT CURSE?

"But surely you have figured out why I sought this enchanted forest? For as was written long ago—'Whoever spills a living man's blood in the Forest of Friendliness is doomed to wander these woods forever—'"

THESE LANDS DO NOT FRIGHTEN ME.

"—with the Bright Lady as his constant companion."

The dark sword trembled in its master's hands. HER? YOU LIE. NO GODS WOULD DECREE SO CRUEL A FATE. The Ebon Knight looked to the Bright Lady. SURELY HE JESTS. TRULY THERE COULD NOT BE SUCH A C-CURSE?

Behind the Bright Lady, the woodland creatures nodded their little furry heads in unison. The Ebon Knight's armor rattled as it shook.

The Bright Lady shrugged. "You already have the curse of undeath on your soul. If you want a second one, hey, well, I have lots of stories to electrify—"

ENOUGH!

The Ebon Knight sheathed his sword. A roar of sorrow escaped him. IS THERE NOTHING LEFT IN THIS WORLD FOR ME, NOT EVEN THE JOY OF EVISCERATING ENEMIES IN PEACE? He whistled, and his fiery stallion trotted out of the darkness.

KNOW THIS, KNIGHT. IF EVER YOU LEAVE THIS FOREST, YOUR DOOM IS ASSURED. I HAVE ETERNITY. THOUGH I EXPECT IT WILL BE MUCH SOONER BEFORE YOU FLEE—WILD-EYED AND GIBBERING—FROM THESE WOODS. *I SHALL BE WAITING.*

He brushed some dirt off his armor, climbed onto his steed, and trotted away. As soon as he turned behind a knot of oaks, Sir Duncan heard him race off in full gallop.

The Bright Lady laughed. "It looks like tall, dark, and loathsome didn't care for me. What a clever ploy. Imagine, my company a curse!" Her laughter sounded like bells cracking.

"Only t-to one as evil as the Ebon Knight," said Sir Duncan. His enemy's words were starting to sink in.

The Bright Lady danced in the air. "I haven't had this much fun since the satyrs' three-legged race. And don't fret, I have many, many, ways to pass the time. If you like, I *do* have some puppy stories to tell. Tale-waggers, I call them."

Sir Duncan's gaze lingered where the Ebon Knight had departed.

Rod M. Santos was abandoned as a baby in a downtown Manhattan Cineplex. He was raised by kind ushers who fed him overpriced Milk-Duds and weaned him on butter-flavored topping. Despite his colorful childhood, he lives a relatively boring existence working in Human Resources for a non-profit agency. Non-profit, by the way, is not a misnomer. Writing allows him to vent off his excess quirkiness. "The Curse of the Friendly Forest" is his second sale to *The Town Drunk*.