

THE VISIT OF LADY N
by pwatson1974 and Ms Tiger to You

A shaft of moonlight filters through the bare branches, shining brightly on the curved bole of the great birch tree standing in the clearing, a covering of pale frost gleaming like silver jewels on the grass. A light breeze caresses the branches, silent under their glittering lace. If one were to examine the bole closely, gleams of light shining through the cracks in the birch's white bark might be discerned. A much closer examination, were anyone so inclined, would reveal the outline of a door within the bark. And if one were curious enough to look up into the glittering branches, they might just glimpse a sign swaying in the breeze. And, if they were foolhardy enough to disregard what happens to curious cats, they might see on the sign a slender figure, seated unsteadily, her hands supporting her, her legs stretched out ahead, glimmering stars circling her head somehow avoiding the glittering tiara of icicles erupting through her chestnut hair, her body covered, if you can call it that, in an elegant tracery of frost that would bring a blush to a revue showgirl. And beneath her, in curling, elegant script are three words: 'The Dizzy Dryad'. And if one was still curious enough to ignore the very sensible voice in the the back of ones brain telling one just how bad an idea this was, one could open the door. And that's when things would get interesting.

The fire burns brightly in its hearth, casting the shadows of the patrons clustered around it into shadows dancing on the walls. A smaller, less salubrious fire by the bar now houses the cauldron, still bubbling away with broth. Above the hearth, covering most of the wall hangs an ornately bronzemongered frame, the contents covered in thick velvet drapes. Behind the bar, Seamus frantically polishes everything within sight, glowering under his thick eyebrows at anyone who dares so much as think of spilling their ale, or worse. "Merridimple! If you are unable to keep from shedding, you are barred!"

Merridimple looks up from the thimble of nectar clasped between her hands, glancing at the glimmering motes swirling around her. "My apologies, Seamus." The motes flicker out and she returns to her nectar, hiccuping as she tries to swallow and titter at the same time.

"Aren't you supposed to be the member of our august band who doesn't get into trouble, my dearest Merridimple? I'm positive you were saying that not a fortnight past." the goblin raises the cracked pewter mug as Merridimple turns her patented, paint-peeling glare on him.

"Yeah, Fiddlewit is right, Merri." the badger agrees, supping his ale.

"Fiddlestick." the goblin corrects under his breath.

"You did say that. Just when we were about to teach those dwarves a lesson in manners."

"There were seven of them, Brock, and even your thick skull might have got creased by that many pickaxes!"

"But their singing was atrocious, you must admit."

Merridimple's glare returns to its original target, who wisely chooses to look aside.

"Why's Seamus covered up the mirror? That was funny watching that was."

"You have an odd sense of humour, Brock, my dear badger. Watching one tawdry mortal's life is hardly riveting entertainment. If she were a queen, or general, or someone halfway interesting it would be one thing..."

"Well, I think..."

"Ahem."

Merridimple turns at the cough, looking down, rather a novel experience, into a bushy-browed, glowering face. "Ah, Seamus, we were just talking about..."

"I know what you were talking about and you can just bloody well stop talking about it, got it?!"

“Seamus!” Merridimple gasps, “Is that any way to talk to such loyal customers as us?”

“If those 'loyal customers' have loose tongues and certain honoured guests find out this isn't as exclusive as they'd thought, then those 'loyal customers' will get me skewered good and proper, so yes, Ms Merridimple, it is the perfect way to speak to such 'loyal customers', I think you'll find. I didn't threaten to bar the whole besotted lot of you, after all.”

“That's a horrible thing to even think of, Seamus, never mind say. Still, if my loose tongue was supping nectar, it couldn't very well blab things to the honoured guest, now, could it?”

Seamus' brows knot tighter together, if that were possible, forming a thundercloud of orange across his browline, “That's extortion!”

“Oh, please, it's just a little bit of nectar. Surely that's worth it to impress these big, important honoured guests you have coming.”

Seamus turns an interesting beetroot colour, the scowl deepening, “Fine. You'll get your nectar. 3 thimbles full. For tonight. No more. And you keep that sweet, innocent mouth of yours that I'm quite bloody sure butter wouldn't bloody melt in firmly shut.”

“Of course, dear, sweet Seamus, I won't say a peep.” she pats him affectionately on the cheek as a cough sounds across the table, “And possibly a similar arrangement for my tablemates. You know they're as trustworthy as me.”

“Don't I bloody just. You screw this up and I'll make sure each one of you is on the iron bloody spikes next to me.”

He stomps off, returning with the drinks and quickly stomping back to polishing at an even more furious intensity.

Outside, a carriage rattles along the frost-laden tracks. The coachman cracks his whip, the russet horses champing at their bridles. The lone passenger reclines on her elegantly upholstered seat as the trees blur past, hoofprints melted in the road behind her. “We shan't be too late, I trust?” she asks, “I do so hate to be more than fashionably late.” The driver suppresses a shiver that has nothing to do with the turning season and urges the horses faster toward the flickering light deeper in the frosty woods.

Inside, Seamus glances surreptitiously at the pocketwatch in his hand, dabbing at his brow. He swallows nervously and puts it away.

Outside, the driver's rust-coloured tailcoat flies behind him as he urges the horses faster yet, their flanks flecked with foam and dark crimson streaks. Their eyes are wide, hooves clattering over melting snow.

Inside, Seamus looks down at his watch again, the room feeling awfully warm, the regulars getting rowdier, feet starting to stamp. He gulps and puts the watch away.

Outside, the driver pulls back on the reins, the horses cantering to a stop at the inn. The Dryad looks down at the fancy carriage. She blinks, rubs her eyes and looks again. Her mouth opens and closes. The door to the carriage opens, a pale hand extending from a sleeve wrapped in dark fox fur. The driver scrambles to dismount before the rest of the arm can emerge, smoothing down his coat as the passenger emerges.

Inside, Seamus wipes his brow, checking his pocketwatch for the third time in as many heartbeats. The noise beats against him, chanting, hands thumping in tables. He shivers, despite the fire's warmth.

The door flies open, a flurry of frost swirling into the hall. The dog with eyes as big as saucers sniffs the air. A gangly figure steps into the doorway, a russet tailcoat tightly buttoned, coachman's hat of similar hue atop his head. He coughs, clearing his throat, “I present her ladyship, the Lady of the Crossing, the Lady N...” a tall, statuesque figure breezes past him. The dogs with eyes as big as

saucers and eyes as big as dinner plates scamper behind the dog with eyes as big as cartwheels who whimpers, covering his snout with his paws. Her chestnut hair is combed into an elegant architecture of curls and tresses, her skin as pale as the frost she brushes off her dark fox stole. The voluminous dress flaring from her hips is made of a dozen layers, a rainbow of reds, oranges and russet browns. Dark fox fur sweeps the floor with every step. She glances around the Dryad, taking in, and dismissing as unimportant, everyone with a single glance. The haughty sneer lasts just long enough to be noted before fading.

The noise dies to hushed silence. All eyes stare at the doorway. Merridimple's mouth hangs open, nectar dribbling over her chin. Fiddlestick fades backwards into the dim shadows. Brock looks down at the table.

“Are we in time for the unveiling?”

Seamus blinks and stumbles across the floor. “Y-y-y-your Ladyship, this is an honour. Yes, yes, if you'll come this way.”

Lady N strides imperiously after him as he shoos patrons aside. Lady N's gaze never lingers on anyone, for which every single patron thanks their assorted deities, patrons, or anthropomorphic representations. She approaches the best seat in the house, waves a hand disdainfully for her driver to brush it clean, a russet cushion slipped onto the seat.

Seamus steps up before the assembled, and now hushed, audience, feeling the weight of every eye, but especially one pair with russet irises flecked with scarlet, upon him. “Lady, gentlebeings, I” he gulps, “I present to you a window into the world of mortals.” He had more to say, much more, but the desire to be there fades fast under that calm gaze. He grabs the cord and yanks, the curtains sliding smoothly apart, thankfully, to reveal a backstage room in the mirror, cramped, paint peeling as a slim woman stuffs herself into a tight russet harem costume, her hair piled up, muted swearing coming from the mirror.

On the other side of the mirror, “I must be out of my mind working for him again. After what happened the last time. Still, a job, hah, is a job, and the rent isn't going to pay itself.” She checks herself in the mirror, making sure everything is where it should be and as covered as it's likely to get. “Okay, girl, showtime, time to put on your game face.” she pulls herself erect, fixes her best haughty sneer in place on her face and strides towards the stage.

The crowd cheers, more than a little drunkenly, “It's the end of the world as we know it” playing over tinny speakers, 'Apocalypse Party 2012' banners around the hall. The spotlights flash off the magician's gold lamé cape. Somehow she keeps from laughing, again, at the ridiculous outfit he's chosen. She snarls out at the audience, stalking towards him, a small square basket on a low, wheeled trolley platform behind him. “Beware the coming of dread Nibiru.” the magician intones solemnly, rather ruined by the nasal whine of his actual voice. She turns her full attention towards him, raising her hands. The magician raises a thin sword from the basket, “Back, foul planet. Sol commands you to stay your destructive course.” She snarls, putting far more venom into the glare than the part strictly demands as she approaches. “Back, I say, back into the darkest void that spawned you.” She quails theatrically, stepping up into the basket, slowly sinking down. The crowd cheers as the magician rams the swords through the basket, proclaiming the defeat of the harbinger of destruction.

On the other side of the mirror, a deathly hush has fallen, broken only by a tiny whine from the dogs by the doorway. All eyes save two have turned away from the mirror. The Lady's driver stands stock still, resolutely and steadfastly ignoring the sweat tricking under his starched collar. Every other of the many and varied patrons pushes themselves as far into the corners as they can. The Lady's eyebrow quirks upwards. “A planet? A planet?! They have dared to use my name for a mere lifeless planet! This insult is too much to be born! And to be defeated! Me?! Defeated by a querulous fop posing as the Sun. for the amusement, amusement, of a bunch of drunken oafs?! No! This shall not stand!” she rises in regal dudgeon, sparks of russet flame flickering around her dress

and hands as she strides towards the mirror.

“Um, my Lady...” she ignores Seamus, much to his relief, pressing her hands onto the glassy surface of the mirror and walking through, the mirror rippling like a still pool around her. The silence is shattered by a scream as the assistant tumbles out of the mirror, surrounded by russet sparks, rolling to a stop by the Lady's chair. She blinks, looks up into the faces crowded around her and screams.

“Not again!!!”

On the second side of the mirror, a sword slowly pushes out of the basket. The crowd holds its collective breath as it clatters to the floor. Another follows, then the third and the fourth. The lid of the basket tumbles away as the Lady N rises up from the basket, her dress flaring outwards to drape over the basket, hiding it from view. The crowd applauds at the switch of assistant, especially one in such a voluminous dress. “You mortal curs dare to make mere amusement of my presence! After taking my name in vain for your trivial entertainment. Well, if you oafs desire the end of the world so much, I should be a poor sport not to oblige you!”

On the first side of the mirror, “So, what do we do with her?”

“Do with me”? Listen, buddy...” a serrated bone knife appears in the hobgoblin's hands and the assistant quietens with a squawk.

“If I may, sirs.” the driver starts, “The mortal personage came here as my Lady left. Given the sheer impossibility of the Lady allowing something so bizarre to happen by mere chance, she clearly has designs for this mortal who has dared to impersonate her.”

“Wait, what?”

“And I should not need to point out, I'm sure, that the Lady may take a certain umbrage if others spoil her planned punishment for this presumptuous mortal.” a collective shiver rushes through the room, “In fact, it would behove the cautious-minded to take the utmost care with said mortal to ensure she is in prime health for the Lady's special attention.”

The crowd mutters but steps back. “Apparently our dear mortal didn't learn from her previous ill-considered impersonation.”

“Yeah, Fiddlewit. She's dumber'n a bag of dead rats.”

“Fiddlestick.”

“Poor thing. She looks terrified out of her wits with those brutes looming over her.”

“Dear Merri, what are you planning...”

Merridimple puts her thimble of nectar aside, puts her fingers into her mouth and, as Fiddlestick and Brock leap to cover their ears, lets out an ear-piercing whistle. All eyes turn. “Would the faux lady care to share a table? Perhaps, the Lady's driver would be so good as to bring her over here? Seamus, would you be so good as to expand our deal jussssst a smidgen?”

Seamus glowers as the driver puts a calloused hand under the assistant's arm, leading her across the room stares following them. “Thank you muchly, miss. Best way to avoid unpleasantness, I think.”

“They were going to...” the assistant trails off, still looking very pale, eyes wide, darting around.

“Yes, miss, but they won't now. The Lady's far too frightening to cross.” Seamus fusses up, carrying a battered tankard of foamy beer, “Ahhhhh, you're a gentleman, sir.”

“Nice bluffing, by the way.” Merridimple smirks as she lifts up her thimble.

“Bluffing, miss?” he asks quizzically.

“Bluffing. The Lady isn't likely to give a rats arse for this mortal bint, is she?”

“Couldn't say, Miss. The Lady is not the most predictable of employers. Thought it wise to make sure things were arranged to her potential liking, miss.”

“And speaking of the Lady, you might want to keep your mortal from seeing what she's doing.”

On the second side of the mirror, Lady N flicks her fingers, one of the swords rising into her hand, “So, you are the fool who thinks to trivialise my name for your profit? Did you think a lady of the sidhe would permit such open mockery to pass unchallenged?”

“Someone's getting too into their part.” someone in the audience stage whispers.

The Lady whips around to the audience, sweeping her imperious gaze across them. “Don't think I've forgotten you drunken fools. How dare you laugh at your superiors?” the sword waves in her hand, russet sparks flying from the speakers as the music pops, crackles and dies.

“Do a card trick!”

“A card trick? You insolent...” her eyes fall on the cards scattered over the small props table. She smiles. “Very well, jackanapes. If you wish a card trick, a card trick you shall have.” The cards float up into the air, whirling out across the audience who cheer and clap as the cards twist and turn overhead. One of the cards drift lazily down, spinning slowly.

“Heh. I got this.” Someone in the audience, beer in the other hand snatches out, grabbing the card. The card sticks to his fingers, holding them fast, “Huh?” And begins to grow, swelling in size, if not thickness, drawing the drunken catcher into the surface of the card, turning a three-dimensional reveller into a two-dimensional image trapped between the pips of the man-sized card. At first, there is some applause, a little worried, not knowing where the trick is going, but as other cards start to drift down, capturing more and more of the audience, the screaming starts in earnest. Those nearest the doors and still sober enough to recognise the threat rush for the doors. The Lady smiles like a cat with a mouse, russet sparks flicker around the doors and the patrons find them stuck fast as the cards swoop in to devour them.

Ignoring, well, enjoying, the screams, she turns her dangerous smile towards the cowering magician. “And as for you, you pusillanimous, wayward, flap-mouthed flirt-gill!” she raises the sword. The magician stammers several things as the sword leaps from her hands, embedding itself in his wrist, turning the stammerings into an inarticulate scream of pain. The Lady waits as another sword rises into the air, “Hmmm, we should at least make a statement out of you.” the sword flies out, stabbing through his other arm. The swords rise into the air, taking the shrieking, moaning magician with them. A flick of the wrist sends the swords plunging into the wall above the doors causing the few audience members not transmuted by the cards to run the opposite way. A third sword sails across the hall, piercing his ankles and the fourth plunges into the centre of his chest. “I think that message will be clear enough.” she leaves the last of the audience to the cards, leaving the magician's feeble moans as she strides back towards the basket in the centre of the stage.

And back on the first side of the mirror, “Well, guess I'd better get this down quickly. Doubt the Lady would like me drinking on duty.” He gulps the beer down, wiping the foam moustache away. A bottle of fine wine sits in front of the assistant, empty, her eyes glazed, staring at a somewhat subdued Fiddlestick and Brock. Behind the bar, Seamus counts the driver's coins, considerably happier to actually have some drinks paid for. The driver rises, crossing to the Lady's chair.

“Merri, that wasn't nice stuff, what she did, that wasn't nice at all. What happens when she sees the mortal here? She won't still be mad, will she?”

“I think the Lady's sanity is a topic that should never be broached, Brock, my dear badger, and certainly not with her so close.”

The Lady strides through the mirror, russet sparks flying around her, a satisfied smile on her face as if the slaughter had satiated her anger. Merri gulps, looking across the table and splutters on her nectar as the assistant dissolves in a sparkle of russet.

“M'lady.”

“An interesting diversion. I would hope the next time we journey here something less scandalous is on show. Otherwise, we might think it deliberately provocative.” she strides out, drawing all eyes with her, the driver opening the door for her, the dogs cringing back. The driver glances in the mirror, the assistant staring wide-eyed around the devastation, one hand over her mouth, her eyes wide, body trembling.

The door closes. The collective held sigh is released. “Hey!” a rough, grating voice calls out, “What happened to the Lady torturing that mortal?!”

Everyone turns towards the mirror. “Told you he was bluffing.” Merridimple murmurs.

Outside, the driver holds the door open for the Lady as she clambers aboard. He climbs into the driver's seat, takes up the reigns and salutes the sign of the Dizzy Dryad and rides off, the sign's sigh hanging in the frosty air.



This work by [Paul Watson](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivative Works 2.0 UK: England & Wales License](#).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <mailto:magicbookshelf@blueyonder.co.uk>.