

The Lady of the Mists

By Ed Greenwood

How It Began

It had been one of those warm, reeking days in Dock Ward that ended very suddenly, when an onshore breeze brought both dusk and sudden chills racing around corners and down littered alleys.

And that meant "the mists."

Sea-mists, rolling in across the harbor in a green-gray cloud as thick as an old winter cloak, and about as clean. This fog could hide any number of knives and unpleasantly grinning alley wolves grasping them, who were ready to part a fat merchant from his purse, and a wench from her rags and more.

The mists are one of the strongest reasons folk of other streets hated Dock Ward. The fog had tentacles -- tentacles that slew.

This wasn't a night to be out in, save in large and well-armed bands with many a storm-lantern and abundant cudgels or blades brandished for all peering eyes to behold.

Wherefore Shrimp Alley had fallen eerily silent, the usual groaning carts and wagons elsewhere, and the stooped old women who shucked shrimp with flashing knives all indoors huddled over hearths and kettles, feeling their age and moaning softly to themselves as they waited for the bright morning sun to chase the chill away.

"A proper night for sea-ghosts," as the saying went. Marduck Jaesur used it now, rather wearily, as he dropped the night-bar across the inside of the street door, blew out the lone candle-lantern of Jaesur's Bright Broadsheets, and stood in the gloom, resigning himself sourly to spending a night on the hard, damp cot in the back room. He was cold and ravenously, achingly hungry, the broadsheets trade not going well these days, but he wasn't about to try getting home in this -- not when a bed every bit as damp, with a wedge of old and rather furry cheese in the crock under it, was all that awaited him there.

"So it is," came a thin voice from behind him. A voice that should not have been there.

Marduck stiffened -- and then whirled around, snatching for his belt-knife.

To find himself facing a lady . . . well, a woman in a high-bodiced gown, grander than anything Marduck had ever seen up close, that had chasings and filigreed cutouts that displayed rather a lot of smooth, unblemished skin. She was perhaps a year or two younger than he was, or then again a year or two older, and she was beautiful, if forbidding, her features sharp. She stood as grandly as any noble, gazing at him unsmilingly through the forest of hanging broadsheets.

She was -- Marduck swallowed -- glowing faintly, and he could see right through her . . . except near the floor, where she faded away altogether.

So. A ghost.

Marduck swallowed again.

His ghostly visitor drifted suddenly closer, a seaweedy chill preceding her, and Marduck found himself afraid.

Chokingly, unbreathingly afraid.

"Stay back!" he snarled, thrusting his knife up between them.

She gave him a smile that was very close to a sneer, and drifted through it, until her nose was almost touching his.

"Hello, sailor," she whispered, misty breath darting into his mouth like a cold flame.

Marduck tried to swallow, failed, and settled for fainting instead.

How It Continued

He was shivering, lying huddled on something hard and dirty. Something that smelled familiar, only worse.

His own shop floor.

How had he --?

Oh. Oh, gods, yes. The ghost!

Marduck found his knife still in his hand, and he rolled over and up to his feet quickly, seeking that faint greenish glow to thrust it into.

The ghost was sitting in his seat, at his heaped and littered desk, with her feet (visible now, and wearing spike-healed boots every bit as ornate as her gown) propped up on the heap of rotting old broadsheets that served him as a footstool.

She was reading more recent broadsheets -- her hands somehow holding them and turning the pages, though he could still see right through her -- with her lip curled and one eyebrow arched in disbelief.

"Bane vs. Cyric -- Winner Take All!!!!" she read aloud, in tones of incredulous distaste. "Dire Pandas From Kara-Tur Invade the Unapproachable East!"

She turned the broadsheet over with a rustle that sounded somehow contemptuous and declaimed the next headline: "Wild Magic at Seven Sisters Surprise Party Leaves Wizard Elminster Pregnant With Twins on His Birthday/Khelben To Be Midwife/Halaster Blackcloak the Father!" She shook her head. "Singing Gond-Device Destroyed By Wizard, 'Had To Save All Not Yet Deaf' . . . really!"

She did something, tossing her head in pique, that made the broadsheet vanish in a jet of green-white flame that left behind only an acrid smell, and gave Marduck a glare. "Do you write this chamberpot-filth?"

"Er -- yes," the Man Who Keeps All Waterdeep Abuzz (or so his newly painted shop sign told the passing world) replied, irritation conquering fear. After all, she was a ghost; she couldn't actually do anything to him.

Could she?

The ghost plucked another broadsheet off her lap. "Is this one of yours, too? 'Misguided Halfling Tries To Raise Moander?' 'City of Shade Seeking New Site' 'Man Escapes Curse of Bubbles, Now Can't Stop Punning?'"

"Yes," Marduck replied rather stiffly. "Have you some . . . objection to my writings?"

The broadsheet flamed -- how did she do that? It just ignited in her hand and was gone, with no heat that he could feel, or (Marduck looked up) scorchings among the damp and dusty broadsheets overhead -- and was gone.

Ignoring his question, the lady he could see through lifted the next broadsheet, and read in tones heavy with disapproval, "Drunken Mages Transform Castle Waterdeep, Garish Renovation a Hit With Khelben Blackstaff." She sighed, looked down the page, and added, "Knotty Pine Tavern To Hold Festival of Misrule, 'Sounds of the Seven Sisters' Nine-She-Minstrel Band To Perform." Another flare of flame, and the broadsheet beneath selected. "Zhentarim-Trapped Cake Delivered to Wrong House/Mirt 'Just Fine' . . . to say nothing of 'Lone Watchful Order Mage Survives Election Battle 'Thanks To Hat' . . . which seems to say nothing at all about which election, and for what." She looked up, disgust and withering scorn prominent in her gaze. "Give me good reason why I shouldn't kill you. Speak now."

Marduck blinked. "Kill me? How?"

The ghostly lady drifted upright, somehow, and rolled across the room like advancing mist, the air turning icy at her approach.

Marduck cowered back, wildly seeking a way out that wasn't there. "No! Please! Don't! Don't kill me please I didn't mean to give offense . . . I . . . no . . . I really I just write things to entertain folk I -- I --"

His wild gabbling trailed off as he realized his dagger, suddenly covered with a white sheen of frost and searing his hand with its cold, was thrust right into the wraithlike breast of his fell visitor.

She looked down at it, smiled, put her hands on her hips, and shifted seductively sideways, like a brothel-lass dancing. The knife slashed across a phantom breast, sliced gown falling away and flesh with it, colorless blood spurting.

Marduck choked, his stomach starting to heave. Hastily he pulled his knife back -- as she spun in the other direction, most of the other side of her chest flopping away from her ribcage like a huge steak . . .

Marduck was staggeringly, blindly sick, violently and helplessly and all over his shop floor, adorning the foot-pile of old and sagging broadsheets.

"Now that," her thin voice said from somewhere above him, "is an appropriate reaction if I ever saw one. Here. Use these to wipe up."

Most of the moldering foot-heap of old broadsheets came down on Marduck's head, driving him face-first into his own foulness, and slamming his chin onto the floor just a bit too hard. Darkness returned.

What Happened Next

He was cold, so cold. Shiveringly, shudderingly, weep-and-whimper cold. Marduck groaned, clutching at his arms and rocking back and forth, back and forth in the bright golden, crackling radiance that warmed his face so faintly, but warmed the rest of him not at all . . .

Bright golden, crackling radiance?

He was bolt upright in an instant, a familiar creaking under him, and staring at -- the last ashes of what had been his foot-pile, swirling in a lazy little circle around a blackened patch of floorboards. The flame was fading and dying, the old broadsheets (though they should have been far too damp to ever ignite, unless the whole shop burned down around them) entirely gone . . . and he was sitting on his own cot, with phantom arms around him and a chin that chilled his very bones on his shoulder.

"Ahh, I love fires," the lady of the mists murmured, that thin voice chillingly close. "When I watch the flames," she said with a hint of sadness now, "I can remember being warm."

Marduck Jaesur sprang up, the cot crashing over in his haste, and got clear across the room to his desk in a single bound.

The floor was clean, he was clean -- and the gowned lady he could see through was whole again, unbutchered, his own knife lying shining in the center of the floor. It was clean, too.

Over its gleam, she gave him a catlike little smile.

"Who are you?" Marduck asked, his bewilderment spilling over.

A ghostly eyebrow arched. "Why do you need to know? Aren't you the scrivener who creates orphaned half-dragons seeking their parents in Dock Ward? Beholders with their eyes awry drifting in agony through South Ward? Minotaur-riding halfling assassins who dwell in the city's sewers, and eat dire ducklings? Shadowvar who've come prowling into the city to steal the harbor? Armies of gibbering mouthers, gnawing their ways through the cellars of North Ward? So, will you believe me, if I tell you? Or will you find it vitally necessary to 'embroider' the truth?"

"Lady," Marduck said heavily, sinking down in his chair, "I really want to know. And after that, why you're here."

"And after that," she added softly, her voice holding not the slightest note of mockery, "how you can be rid of me."

"Well . . ." Marduck swallowed. "Yes."

"Ah. So you can tell truth. I was beginning to wonder."

Marduck ran his hands down his face, hoping this was all a dream, somehow. "Gods, I need sleep," he muttered. "And something to drink."

"There's a flask down behind that heap of broadsheets, there, though how you can think swallowing the little that's left in it will help with anything is beyond me."

Marduck sighed. "I don't need the disapproval of -- of some ghost, a stranger, who just drifts in here, scaring the --"

"Last meal."

"Thank you, 'last meal' out of me, and burns my livelihood, belittles my writing, and . . . and . . ."

"Plays silly games with you when you're trying to sleep. When you'd much rather be alone -- cold, hungry, and miserable, but alone. Well said. The disapproval of strangers is unwelcome, atop all that. So I'll away with it, and we'll start playing."

Marduck peered at her from between his fingers, trying not to groan. "Playing?"

"A silly game. A truth for a truth. I'll give an answer, and then you will."

"What? Is this some sort of faerie story?"

Her smile was as arch as it was ghostly. "As in: 'Undead Mind Flayer Bard Fights Professional Snake Milker'?"

Playing A Ghostly Game

Marduck groaned again, lifted his feet to put them on their customary perch -- and promptly rediscovered the absence of the stack of crumbling old broadsheets. Painfully.

He slid helplessly out of his chair, his behind slamming bruisingly onto the floor an instant before his boot-heels did. His groan, as he bounced, was answered by tinkling laughter.

The ghost was laughing at him.

Right. So here he was, wide awake now and hurting, his evenfeast gone, his -- his gut chose that moment to rumble, suddenly and loudly, telling half Dock Ward how hungry he was. Marduck winced.

"I'll play," he mumbled. "So tell me the truth: who are you?"

"I am the Lady Aunstance Harpell. Or was, as they say."

"Was? You're dead?"

A ghostly finger waggled. "Ah-ah. My turn."

Marduck groaned. "This is going to be a long night."

"That truth doesn't count, lad. And spare me your groans; 'tis not like you were going to rush off to a revel somewhere. So who are you?"

"Marduck Jaesur." Marduck waved his arm at the cluttered rooms around them. "Of Jaesur's Bright Broadsheets. This."

The ghostly lady nodded. "Very well: I believe I'm dead, though I don't remember how I got this way. Or where I go when I'm not . . . here and there."

"Are you one of the Harpells? Of Longsaddle?"

"Lad," she said reprovingly, "a truth for a truth, remember? So you sell these papers of flaming fancy, and write most of them? Who buys them?"

"Idiots," Marduck replied sourly. "That's the answer you're seeking, isn't it? And yes, I do sell these broadsheets, and write most of them, too. Now that's three answers, so you tell me your lineage, the year you were born, and -- and why you're here, in this room, Beshaba-dash-down!"

"I was born Aunstance Haldryn, eldest daughter of one of the best families in Neverwinter, in the Year of the Marching Moon. I wed Ontorr Harpell of Longsaddle when I was but ten-and-nine, because of these --," she waved at her now-intact and engorged breasts, "-- but mostly because I was a wizardess."

Marduck frowned. "'Wizardess'?"

"Well, that was the title in my day. When they weren't calling me 'slut' and 'spellskirts,' that is. And I'm here because you have the ring of wedlock and said the word that summons me."

"'The word'? What word?"

"Ghosts."

"Oh. Wait . . . 'ring of wedlock'?"

"Yes, there's nothing wrong with your hearing, Goodman Jaesur."

"Does that mean . . ."

"Ah, there's nothing like a writer-of-broadsheets to put resounding doom into a few unfinished words. Spit it out."

Marduck drew in a deep breath, sighed it back out, and asked carefully, "Does this mean we two are . . . wedded? Linked in some way?"

"Let me translate," the lady of mists said helpfully. "What you don't quite dare to ask is: are you stuck with me?"

"Er. . . yes. Tymora spit on me, yes."

"Yes," Lady Harpell confirmed sweetly.

The Thunder of Human Hunger

Marduck ran his hands down his face again, and he discovered they were shaking.

Staring at his trembling fingers and barely seeing them, he said a little dazedly, "You're -- you were born over forty years ago. So you've been . . . er, not alive for . . . for . . ."

The ghostly lady reclining gracefully along the edge of his upset cot gave him a little frown. "I know not. I seem to remember a birthday feast, at which I was six-and-twenty . . ."

"But you're still married to -- to, uh, Ontorr, yes?"

"No. He perished in an unfortunate accident -- a spellburst -- when enchanting the ring."

"Oh. The ring. Ah, we're still playing the game, yes?"

"Yes," she replied, sounding amused.

"So. Uh. Ask me something."

"So you can in turn get a truth out of me that you can barely wait for? Of course, dearest." She glanced up and waved languid fingers at the broadsheets hanging all around. "How much coin do you make, selling these? Do you often go hungry?"

"Mere handfuls, and yes," Marduck muttered, and then looked up, leaned forward, and burst out, "So, now, tell me true: where is this ring?"

Lady Harpell looked coy again. "Here. In this shop."

"Where in this shop?"

She held up her finger. "Ah, now, that's two --"

"Taloz take you, woman! You didn't answer me properly! Where is it?"

"Right where you're sitting, wedded lord of mine."

"Stop that! What d'you mean, 'right where I'm sitting'?"

"Just that, as I said," she replied coyly. "Right where --"

"Tell me," Marduck snarled, half out of his chair and fists clenched, "or I'll --"

"Or you'll . . . what, lord?" she breathed, eyes flashing excitedly.

"I'll -- I'll -- "

"Ah, such eloquence, my lord. It must be the hunger that so addles your wits. Or perhaps -- just perhaps -- 'tis tenday after tenday of writing such eel-dung as 'Enspelled Naked Halfling Arrested After Bold Theft/Thinks Himself Invisible' and 'Paladin Always Tells Truth But His Squire Spews Lies' . . . Well, which do you think? If you can still think."

Marduck groaned again, and this time his stomach joined in, making a muted but lengthy thunder.

"Oh, my lord," the lady of the mists said concernedly -- and drifted forward to pluck up the knife from the floor.

Calmly she sliced off three of her fingers, and held them out to him, quivering. "You're so hungry . . ."

Even though he could see right through them, and the blood dripping from them was vanishing silently before striking the floor, Marduck's empty stomach rebelled again.

And then --

Beshaba, Tymora, and Talos, why not?

-- he fainted again.

Dreams and Astonishments

He was somewhere dark and deep, and he was drowning in inky seas.

It seemed to take a very long time, and it hurt not at all.

In fact, the waters seemed quite warm, and nearby, swirling along with him, were a bored-looking dragon -- red dye boiling off it in a long, bloodlike trail to reveal white scales beneath, while gnomes wearing metal caps with eye-lenses waved complicated-looking tools, gabbling to each other excitedly, as they clambered all over those scales -- and a butterfly larger than he was, which was singing bawdy songs in a rich baritone as it circled a disgusted-looking wizard whose beard and robes were both sprinkled with stars.

"Are you one of Elminster's daughters, too?" the dragon asked Marduck, who suddenly found that he couldn't speak. Nothing but bubbles came flooding out, no matter how hard he tried, and with them came brightness, the inky waters going blue-green and then flickering candle-lamp yellow, and he was . . .

He was awake again, that's what he was, and blinking up at a lit candle-lamp he'd never seen before, that was much larger and grander than his own.

This was his shop, yes, but -- but where were all the broadsheets?

"Oh, no," he groaned. "She didn't!"

"Aha," that thin voice said delightedly, "but I did."

"All of them?"

"All of them. After all, you can always write and print more."

"Lady Harpell, you didn't have to burn every last one --"

A chilly finger tapped his lips, not quite solid, but solid enough. "Tut, my lord! Tut and pish! Item: I'm the Lady Aunstance Harpell no longer. I am Lady Jaesur. Thine. Item: I burned nothing while you snored. Now wake up, get up, and eat."

"Eat?"

Marduck blinked away the last gummy confusion of sleep, peered all around, and saw that his desk, chair, cot, and all were gone. Everything but the stacks of paper, the press, the inks, and the printing frames and blocks.

In the shop room that had been cluttered with stack broadsheets, heaped broadsheets, and hanging broadsheets, there now stood a grandly carved table, a small but beautiful canopied bed with fresh linens and pillows, two ornate arch-backed chairs, a beautiful weathercloak thrown over one of them -- and no less than three domed platters on that table. Silver domed platters. With steam leaking out from under their edges. And standing behind it, looking as ghostly as ever, with a smile on her face and all of her fingers back where they belonged, was the lady of the mists. Er, his lady of the mists.

He swallowed, scarcely daring to believe his eyes -- or his nose.

Was that . . . roast boar?

His gut thundered insistently.

"Lady, I --"

"Sit," the ghostly lady ordered, lifting a carving knife that would have served some dock sailors Marduck knew as a cutlass, "and eat."

And she lifted a dome to uncover roast boar with onions, brown rivers of gravy and dripping flooding down its flanks.

Marduck's hands were trembling again. He lifted the cloak, marveling at its weight and quality -- it was clearly for him, and as splendid as any noble lord's -- and discovered two cut-crystal decanters on the seat beneath it. Full to their necks with --

"Zzar! And elverquisst, by Tymora!"

The carving knife flashed, pointing to the chair. Clutching the decanters in his hands, Marduck sat.

A Very Late Meal

He tried not to shake his head in disbelief.

Her carvery was deft, and the boar was real enough. Marduck's mouth flooded, aching to eat. "Aunstance --"

That earned him a dazzling smile, and a sudden floating kiss that chilled him and left him burning, all at once.

"Yes, lord?"

"Aunstance, where did all this come from? How did you . . . ?"

"Very easily, lord. If ghosts appear to the living just so, and say the right things, they can be very persuasive."

"I'll bet. Er, doing what?"

"Eat," she commanded. "Slowly!"

Almost choking, his mouth burning with two big bites of hot boar, Marduck swigged from a decanter -- the zzar, thankfully, not the elverquisst -- and knew relief, even as his lady frowned and said, "Goblets. I quite forgot. Forgive me, lord, I'll redress soonest."

"Redress? Aunstance, don't be silly! This is wonderful!"

"My lord must eat. And bathe. We'll hie to Hearthfires when you're done."

Marduck choked again. "The Hearthfires? I can't afford to walk past that --"

"You can now. Mind you disrobe as you go, and drop your rags in the street, wherever you are; you'll not be needing those again."

"Oh, and I'm supposed to just walk naked into the Hearthfires, am I? How many steps d'you think the doorjacks'll let me take, laughing, before they --"

"As many as my lord desires. As I said, ghosts can be persuasive."

"You're going to scare Waterdeep into . . . into providing me things? Like you got all this?"

"My lord," Aunstance said angrily, "I did not scare folk into yielding up these things! I persuaded them to purchase your broadsheets! Or trade things they had in plenty for your words!"

She turned in a swirl of chill mists, to lay a hand that steamed and sizzled on the nearest hot dome, and announced, "Your saga of the one-legged pirate and the drunken harem girl bought this!" She drifted through that dome to the next, and added, "The tale of the speaking sword that wants only peace won you this!"

Flouncing around the table, she added, "The tale -- though I think it rather poor -- of the cursed house in Calimshan that strews enchanted evil weapons throughout the Realms, day and night, through drifting portals, I traded for this and the platter of boar you're so noisily gnawing your way through!" Eyes flashing, she threw the carving knife high into the air.

"My lady," Marduck gabbled, hastily swallowing more succulent boar, "I'm sorry I doubted you! Please don't be angry with me! I'm just a fool of a scrivener who --"

"Aha!" his lady of the mists cried, putting out a hand and unconcernedly letting the descending carving knife plunge down through it, "but you admit it! Yes! Scriveners who know they're fools I can work with!"

Staring at the carving-knife standing hilt-deep in a ghostly but bleeding palm, Marduck found his stomach heaving again.

Hastily he looked away and tried to think of bored dragons.

Trailing blood . . . oop . . .

Wine and the Bridal Bed

"You've not much of a warriors' gut on you, that's for sure," his ghostly lady complained, somewhere chillingly close to his ear. "Now get your face up out of the boar and sip some zzar. You'll be needing your strength for the morrow."

Marduck opened his eyes again. Had he actually spewed, or --?

No, thank the gods. Or so it seemed. "Pray accept my apologies," he said slowly. "I've been . . . hungry for a long time. Broadsheet scribes make all too little coin in Waterdeep, these days."

"Why?"

"Too many of us. Too few citizens with time and coin to spare for mere fancies." He grimaced. "After all, how many hard-headed merchants will pay a good copper for 'Mages Duel With Oaths/Gives Dwarf Elder Axe-Cleaving Headache'?"

"You'll be surprised. If they believe there's a coded treasure message hidden in those words, or your tale describes lust colorfully enough to make them squirm and slip into a back room to read it in private . . ."

Marduck blinked. "Lady, I --"

"Am astonished? Hah. My lord, I've just begun with you! Now eat up. The bed awaits."

Marduck swallowed. Hard. "Uh . . ."

"Oh, stop it, man! Show some spine! If I tried to share yon slumberboard with you, I'd chill the life out of you well before dawn -- and dawn's not all that far off, now. No, I need you rested for the work ahead!"

"The work ahead?" Marduck echoed faintly. "What sort of work?"

"Tale-telling. Just as you've been doing -- but under my direction."

Marduck frowned. "Direction?"

"I'll tell you what to write, stone-wits!"

Marduck tried not to let his frown deepen, but failed. "Lady, I don't think --"

"Precisely! You don't think! You believe an endless succession of wild, random tales will win you coins enough to live on! What was that word you used earlier? Idiot! Yes, my lord, you are one of those!"

Marduck winced. So this was marriage . . .

Cold arms went around him, and he stiffened. "'Sentient Bardic Ioun Stone Serenades Watch Patrol in Castle Ward,'" she murmured. "'Spell Activated on Old Tapestry in Noble Mansion, Endless Horde of Puppies Issuing Forth.'"

Marduck winced again. "I wrote those, yes," he muttered.

The cold arms tightened, making him shiver. "'Firebrand Flametongue Comes Out of Retirement and Opens Flower Shop, Promises 'Fun With Icing,''" she said gently. "'Mute Man Mikel Has Magic Legs.'"

She was in his lap, now, as cold as harbor mist, her voice as quiet as it was inexorable. "'Necromancer Graden of Nebera Creed Discovers Mug of Wonder with a Wand of Wonder as Swizzle Stick, Being Used in Trades Ward Tavern.'" She chuckled softly, and added, "'Ugly Princess Trades Divining Rod of Virginity for Feather Boa of Faerie Fire.'"

"Um. They are pretty lame, aren't they?"

"My lord," Marduck's ghostly bride agreed, "they are. But you can do so much better, and so make us rich." Then she kissed him.

It left his lips numb, but -- astonishingly enough -- his heart afire.

Endgame

He shivered involuntarily, and Aunstance swiftly faded away from him, coming back with the cloak and the words, "Now bundle up; I'm making you cold."

Obediently, Marduck bundled up.

"Eat a little more," his ghost bride commanded, and then lowered her voice into a parody of a street crier and intoned, "'Undead Bard's Sad Songs Summon Celestial Penguins.'"

Marduck snorted, and shook his head in embarrassment. "Did you read all of them?"

"Of course," came the pert reply. "I had to sell them."

She drifted to the bed and started doing things to the pillows and adjusting what was probably -- by the hissings of steam that rose up her arms -- a heated bedpan. "Unloading 'Halfling Under Permanent Enlarge Spell, Keeps Hitting Head' wasn't easy, mind you. Nor was 'Mage Challenges Own Mirror-Reflection to Drinking Duel to the Death,' for that matter. You worked celestial penguins into that one, too -- is there some deep-seated fear you should be telling me about, lord?"

"No. I -- some crazed-wits of an armsman -- the one who claimed to have seen a hand-sized ship come sailing up out of Undermountain through the Yawning Portal, and then expand to full size over Dock Ward, and sail away -- talked about how he'd let a horde of penguins into the city sewers, once, and I've made jokes about penguins ever since."

"Ah. Times have been hard, haven't they?"

"Yes," Marduck muttered, suddenly very tired. His belly was full, and he was warmer than he'd been in months. "Do I really have to walk all the way to the Hearthfires?"

"On the morrow, lord, on the morrow," Aunstance said soothingly. "We can have these linens washed -- along with every other scrap of cloth you own."

"Of course," the scrivener yawned, pushing himself up from the table. "I need sleep."

"Indeed. To bed with you."

"The food," he muttered. "The rats . . ."

"Die in an instant when I chill their hearts in my hand," his ghostly lady told him, drifting over to blow out the candle-lamp. After it went out, she did something to make her own glow dim, too. "Now, off to bed."

Marduck nodded, stepped away from the table, and then stopped and frowned. "You never did tell me about this ring of wedlock. I've never even seen it."

"I'm not surprised, the way you wolf food down. You swallowed it more than a month back, probably in a sausage, and it's lodged inside you somewhere -- or you'd have lost it again in the usual way of things we eat, long since."

Marduck grimaced. "I see." He reached the bed, slumped thankfully down, and said, "Tell me one thing more. Just what are you going to have me write, that will make me -- us -- so rich?"

Just for a moment, her smile was as bright and broad as the lamp had ever been. "I'm going to spy on nobles for you, and describe what I see, so that you can pen scenes both vivid and true."

Marduck suddenly found himself wide awake -- and cold again, too. "And try to sell them in the streets? They'll come and slay me!"

"Not if you sell the only copy of 'What the Roaringhorns Did Abed Last Night' to their bitter rivals the Phulls, after word has spread that your tales are utter truth -- and you sell the Margasters the lone copy of 'Words Spoken in Private This Day by the Sultlues Regarding the Margasters'! At, say, five hundred gold apiece, that'll give you plenty of time to buy the hiding you'll need to go into after you sell all the city 'How Lady Tarm Entertained Six Noble Lords and a Passing Bugbear Without Ever Leaving Her Bed' with all the florid, steamy detail I know you're capable of penning!"

Marduck looked at her, swallowed, and then started to grin.

"I believe I'm falling in love with you."

Her teeth flashed in a smile. "Fie, sir! Fie! None of this talk of love! Convenience is what marriage is founded solidly on: mutual convenience!"

"So what do you get out of it?" he asked, suddenly serious.

She drifted to him, then, opening her arms, and he fought -- successfully -- not to flinch in the slightest as they embraced, and her chill bit into him. She seemed more solid than ever, though she weighed nothing, and in the deep gloom looked like little more than a shadow.

"Entertainment, my lord," she breathed, between kisses. "And banishment of loneliness."

"Oh?" he pouted, patting the bed, "and what of my loneliness?"

"Well, now, writer-of-fancies," she murmured, floating up to the ceiling and making spellcasting gestures in his direction, "being as your imaginings seem to have failed you, let me say it straight out."

Marduck grinned. "Please do."

"Prestidigitation," she purred, "is a spell with many uses."