

FANTASY GONE WRONG

EDITED BY
Martin H. Greenberg
and Brittiany A. Koren

DAW BOOKS, INC.
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Follow the trail of breadcrumbs . . .

“Vanishments,” Sir Hanson read. “Mysterious vanishments within the Dark Woods, cause unknown sorcery suspected.” He shook his head. “But that’s impossible. Who’d go *into* the Dark Woods these days? Everyone *knows* that they’re rife with witches who’d turn a child into gingerbread and gobble him up before you can blink. And since the construction of the Dark Woods Bypass, there’s no need to risk traveling through this unholy place. Only a fool would do so.”

Once more, Sir Hanson’s head filled with the king’s indignant voice giving him his assignment. *We’re not talking about a bunch of children or village idiots here, Hanson; we’re talking about some of the most cunning, ruthless, successful merchants in my realm! These were not stupid men, and yet they were all last observed going into the Dark Woods and not coming out again.*

Men? Sir Hanson had echoed. *But in the old tales, isn’t it always children who—*

His Majesty cared not a festering fig for the old tales. *Do you think I’d be wasting any of my manpower if this was about children? Children do not pay taxes, or see fit to remember their beloved king with appropriately lavish gifts at Yuletide. To the fuming pits with the children: These are real people who’ve vanished, and I want to know the reason why!*

—from “Crumbs” by Esther M. Friesner

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For Robert J. Ambrose,
When my reality wasn't always what I expected,
And my fantasies were far from coming true,
You were there to listen.
Thanks, Dad, for always knowing.

—B.A.K.

INTRODUCTION

Brittiany A. Koren

Late one evening, my husband and I were talking, bouncing ideas off one another about our future and looking back to see if our lives had turned out to be the way we had tried to plan it. Not quite, but we decided we were content in our amusement, as we quietly tucked our three children into bed after numerous drinks of water, teeth brushing, and finding the correct stuffed animals. Again, all was still in the house. A peaceful time for reflection. It was a night like most, still I'll remember it the rest of my life. It was also the night the wheels began turning for this anthology.

Why was there such a fascination with humorous fantasy that was making more headway into theaters? My personal favorites were movies like *Shrek* and *Ella Enchanted* that I had enjoyed many times, watching along with my kids. But still, what was so interesting about stories that went wrong? They weren't the typical epic fantasy, but still had all the context of one.

Well, I decided, so many times there is an expectancy of where our lives should be and where it is going to end up. As in most stories there is a path, if you will, that we should be on. However, that path isn't always the right one we need to have under our feet, although, sometimes it still leads us where we need to go even if it makes getting there a little more bumpy.

The stories herein are just that. It's slapstick humor with all the elements of a good fantasy: dragons, elves, knights in shining armor, quests, and the occasional talking magical creature.

I asked sixteen wonderful authors to write stories about a fantasy with a little humor (after all, everyone needs to laugh) and an irony to the story that was far from being foreseen, stories where the paths were far from the expected. And I'm very pleased with the results. From Mickey Zuckerman's "Battle of Wits" where the battle is more in the mind than on the field, to Lisann Norman's story about how gaming can sometimes be more lifelike than reality in "Is This Real Enough" to Brian Stableford's "The Poisoned Chalice" where an elf wonders if his quest will ever end. All the stories are rich with prose that will make you laugh and make you wonder how your own life has taken that different path. And how you've survived to become the wiser, or at least enjoyed the scenery along the way. I greatly enjoyed reading these tales and I want to thank these outstanding authors for sharing their talents and showing us their version of fantasy gone wrong.

THE POISONED CHALICE

Brian Stableford

Brian Stableford hopes to publish his hundredth book before the end of 2006. Titles that are helping him through the nineties include *Kiss the Goat: A Twenty-First Century Ghost Story* from Prime Press, translations of various volumes in Paul Feval's pioneering crime fiction series featuring the Habitués Noirs—beginning with *Salem Street*—from Black Coat Press, and a definitive reference book, *Science, Fact and Fiction*, from Routledge.

WORLD'S EDGE 4 MILES said the relevant arm of the signpost. At least, that's what it said now. The 4 replaced a scratched-out 5, which had replaced a scratched-out 6, and so on to 10. There had been other numbers before that, but someone had repainted the sign some years ago to make way for a new set.

The signpost's only other surviving arm was set at right angles to the first. Since the repainting the hamlet to which it pointed the way had apparently changed its name to Brinkville. The arm pointing the direction from which Umsonofer had come had been broken off.

The elf lowered his backpack to the ground and sat down on it. His long journey was almost over. He was very tired. It was nearly sundown, and he'd been walking since noon. There was a stream beside the road, making its leisurely way to the Big Drop, and he knelt down with cupped hands to take a drink. He intended to go on, by starlight if necessary, until he reached his destination. There would be time enough to start looking for somewhere to sleep, and perhaps get a bite to eat, on the way back.

When he stood up and turned around, though, he found that he was hemmed in by three stooped dwarfs. He was a foot taller than any one of them, but his girth measurement was a good yard less. Had he had time to draw his poniard, he'd have had a substantial advantage in reach, but they were crowding him and their two-headed axes were already in their hands.

"This is a really bad idea, lads," he said.

"No it's not," said the oldest of the dwarfs. "Since you're on your way to die, you won't be needing any of your luggage, so the charitable thing to do is to drop your pack and your dagger, and take off your clothes. It's a balmy evening, so you won't get cold before you jump—and if you do, it'll give you an incentive to run to meet your fate."

"I'm not a jumper," Umsonofer told them. "I have to throw something off the edge, but then I'll be coming back. You can rob me on the way home, if you want to."

"No need to lie about it, old son," said the dwarf. "We don't mind suicide around here—it's our chief source of income these days. Don't get many elves, mind—but then, you don't look much of an elf. A touch of the human in your family tree, I shouldn't wonder."

The insult was gratuitous. Umsonofer's family had been pure elf for at least fifty generations. On the other hand, fifty generations wasn't that much, by elvish standards, even though it extended to

past more remote than the Seven Magic Wars, the Troll Rebellion, the Invasion of the Giant Moth and the Great Moon Disaster. There was, of course, no proof that the Ers of any previous era had ever erred in that uniquely perverted fashion, but such appearances tended to persist, like stains that would never wash out. Now that humans were finally extinct, people would probably forget, in time, what a "touch of human" might look like—but the world might have dwindled to a mere boulder by then.

The elf had met dwarfish bandits before, in lands where the Rule of Law was a great deal more secure than it was hereabouts, and he knew what the best tactic was for dealing with a situation like this. He picked up his pack, leaped over the stream with a single mighty bound, and took off at a run. Dwarfs' legs were even shorter than their bodies; they couldn't run to save their lives. That, presumably, was why they were so stubborn and tough in armed self-defense.

The land on the other side of the stream had been cultivated within the last ten years, but it had lain fallow long enough to accumulate the usual litter of scrub, including some rather nasty brambles. It wasn't the ideal ground for sprinting—but it was, alas, entirely suitable for setting an ambush. There were two more dwarfs crouching in the bushes, and they had a trip rope. Umsonofer hadn't taken twelve paces before he was brought crashing to the ground with a bone-jarring thump.

He had been holding on to the pack with iron determination, but the impact jarred him so badly that he lost his grip. When he was eventually able to sit up again, he had been disarmed and the dwarfs had already ripped his pack apart, immediately identifying the most interesting and mysterious object within. They had dropped the rest of his meager possessions in order to study the magical seal on the black leather bag, although one of the five was hanging back, standing over him in a calculatedly menacing attitude.

"Have to take it to the village," one of the dwarfs was saying. "Need the sorceress to get into that."

"Then we'll have to split the take twenty ways instead of five," another complained. "And the old woman will want at least double."

"Best to torture the elf here until he opens it for us," opined a third.

"I don't know the spellkey!" Umsonofer was quick to protest. "And if I did . . . opening that bag would cause the death of everyone present."

"Sure," said the oldest dwarf. "I never heard *that* one before. He really might not know the spellkey, though—and if we apply gentle persuasion out here, his screams will likely attract more than the law from the village. Best take him home, just in case. Smack him over the head would you, Potbelly."

"You don't under—" Umsonofer began, before the double-headed axe descended upon him.

Umsonofer woke soaking wet, with a terrible headache. Someone had thrown water over him to bring him around. He rapidly figured out that he had been hit with the flat of the axe rather than the edge, but he wasn't sure whether he ought to be grateful for that. He opened his eyes to find himself propped up in a sitting position, with a roof over his head and a fire near his feet. It was difficult to see much else because of all the dwarfs crowding around him. Dwarfs had a less generous sense of personal space than elves, presumably because their flesh was so ambitious in extending from its vertical axis.

There were three females present, but it wasn't hard to identify the sorceress. She had only one eye, only one tooth, and the craziest eyes Umsonofer had ever seen. Sorcery was a costly business; the power it gave its practitioners to defy cause and effect tended to be debited from their health and welfare in other ways.

The sorceress didn't beat about the bush. "I can't open this, darling," she said. "Not without the spellkey—or something to set me on the right track. Shaggyback here says you don't know it—which is a pity, if true, because it's going to take a long time to feed you to the fire feet first."

"Did he also tell you that opening the bag would kill you all?" Umsonofer asked her. "Your hair friend thought it was just a ploy, but he didn't have the time or the wit to think it through. You know magic, though, and you've been trying to break into the bag for hours. Why do you think I was on my way to throw it over the edge of the world, if it's something valuable? What do *you* think it might be?"

The crazy eyes narrowed. "Why don't you tell us what's in it?" the crone said finally. "Who knows—we might believe you."

"It's a weapon left over from the Magic Wars," Umsonofer said, knowing that they weren't going to believe him, even though it was the truth. "Forged by the last surviving coven of human magicians—the Brotherhood of the Unseeing Eye—when they knew that defeat and extinction were inevitable. It was their last bid to take all the other races with them: a doomsday weapon. They called it the Poisoned Chalice."

"Never heard of it," the sorceress retorted—but there was an extra glimmer of light in her mad eyes. She *had* heard of the Brotherhood of the Unseeing Eye, and understood the kind of lust that might lead the magically ambitious to sacrifice both their eyes instead of the more usual one.

"Few people have heard of it because few who've encountered it have survived to tell the tale," Umsonofer told her, "but you might have felt its existence, in your wildest dreams."

"When you live in Brinkville, darling," the seeress told him darkly, "you can always feel the world dissolving under you, even when you're wide awake and haven't touched a potion in a fortnight."

"Believe it or not," Umsonofer said, "it's not much better a thousand miles closer to the center—nor since the seventh war ended, in fact. Our sorcerers reckon that we might just turn the corner, if we can get rid of *that* for good and all. Why else would I have come all this way?"

"To jump," the oldest male dwarf put in. "Just like everybody else who comes this way."

"If I wanted to jump," Umsonofer pointed out, "I'd have given you the pack, and my clothes too. I tried to run away—doesn't that suggest that I had no desire to die?"

"Start feeding him to the fire," suggested a voice from the crowd. "If he hasn't coughed up the spellkey by the time we reach his knees, we can slit his throat and cook the rest of him properly. There's not much meat on him, but he'll see us through to the weekend."

"You know better than that, Mother," Umsonofer said to the sorceress, who certainly didn't look as if she hadn't touched a potion for a fortnight, or slept peacefully for the best part of a year. "You've felt this moment creeping up on you for weeks. If you can just remember your dreams, and interpret them correctly. . . ."

"Shut up!" said the old female, with such vituperation that Umsonofer knew he'd hit a raw nerve.

Unfortunately, he also knew that it wasn't always a good idea to hit nerves as raw as that, especially when they belonged to people as corrupted by long exercise of the Black Arts as the dwarf sorcerers seemed to be.

"I'll make up my own mind," she said, "when I see what's in the bag. Tell me the spellkey—or as much of it as you know."

"What's in the bag," Umsonofer told her, "is a chalice—a drinking cup. It seems to be made of gold, and studded with precious gems, but that's just glamor. The same glamor will fill you with a raging thirst, and you'll try to drain the cup, but the cup doesn't drain. No matter how fast you drink there's always more liquid inside. It's said that it tastes exceedingly sweet, but I wouldn't know. What I do know is that when your thirst is slaked, you drift off into sleep, and never wake up."

"It's just a tale," said Shaggyback.

"It might not be," the old woman said. "Better let me look before anyone else—I can see through any glamor. It won't hurt me."

"Yes it will," the elf said insistently. "Nothing with intelligence can resist the sight of it."

"Better let Hammertoes take the first look, then," said someone in the crowd—at which point a scuffle broke out.

"Stop that!" Shaggyback commanded. "He's lying. Somebody had to put it *in* the bag. If it was put in, it can be taken out. Right, Mother?" He obviously hadn't taken the hint about the Brotherhood of the Unseeing Eye.

"It could be direly dangerous," the sorceress opined gravely. "I'd need at least a forty percent share of the sale price—not for myself, you understand, but to keep my potion stocks up to strength, for the sake of the common good."

While the haggling went on, Umsonofer had time to think. He could see only one way out of his predicament that would leave his feet intact for the walk to the end of the world, so when the dwarves had settled their dispute, he told the sorceress what the spellkey was. Then he shut his eyes, and waited.

Fortunately, having such a tremendous advantage of numbers, the dwarves hadn't bothered to torture their prisoner up. More than once, in similar situations, Umsonofer had had to work himself free before he could even begin groping around for the chalice.

The game of seek-and-find had never been unduly difficult, because no one had ever contrived to hide the doomsday device, or even release it in such a way that it fell into a deep hole or rolled into an inconveniently narrow gap. Even so, it was never pleasant rummaging among so many dead bodies—and it wasn't just the chalice he had to find. He also had to find the bag in which to secure it. Even though he was only four miles away, he could hardly walk to the edge of the world with his eyes tightly shut—not, at least, if he hoped to come back safely from the brink.

It took him ten minutes to locate the chalice, and another thirty to find the bag, put the chalice inside, and recite the spellkey to seal it again.

By the time he opened his eyes again the only source of light was the red glow of the fire

dwindling embers; the last of the candles the dwarfs had lit before proceeding to their fatal orgy had flickered out. Fortunately his long experience as a groper in the dark had taught Umsonfer to take such difficulties in his ample stride. He located more candles easily enough, and there was enough heat left in the embers to set one aglow. He had been anxious, when the dwarfs had begun to discuss cooking and eating him, that there might not be a crumb to eat in the house, but he found some bread and salted meat, and even a few potatoes—but he wasn't about to start cooking in the midst of twenty reeking corpses when he was only four miles short of his goal.

There had been a certain amount of fighting over the chalice, as there always was, but once the dwarfs had all had a chance to slake their uncanny thirst, the party had lost its zip. They had all had time to lie down and make themselves comfortable before passing away. The expressions on their faces were by no means blissful; their dreams had turned to nightmares before the end. Umsonfer was glad to close the door behind him.

He had brought a candle out with him, mounted in a ray, but its light was very feeble. The clouds weren't supposed to drift beyond the world's limit, but the clouds presently in the sky had either lost their bearings or didn't know the rule; the few stars visible through the gaps shed too little light to help him comfortably on his way. The building in which he'd been confined had been the hamlet's communal blockhouse, but the shadows of several other sleeping huts were discernible in the gloom, as were two big barns and a couple of empty pigsties. He could have bedded himself down for the night easily enough, but he wasn't sure that the chalice had killed every dwarf in the neighborhood. Besides, there might be worse things than bandit dwarfs around—things that could scent dead men from miles away, once the breeze had carried it that far.

In any case, his head was hurting too much to let him sleep.

Umsonfer started walking as soon as he had figured out which way the edge of the world must lie. He used his left hand to protect the flame of his candle from the wind, and resisted the temptation to move so quickly that he would be in danger of tripping. He had to make every effort to avoid breaking his neck and leaving the chalice to be picked up by some greedy ghoulish or inquisitive ogre, who might carry it back in toward the center. Eventually he found the bank of the stream he had jumped earlier and followed its course toward the Big Drop.

"Why me?" he asked himself, talking aloud in order to have the company of his voice. "Why, of all the elves in all the world, did I have to end up with this lousy job?"

The questions were rhetorical—which was perhaps as well, given that Umsonfer was not a philosopher. The simple answer was that somebody had to do it who knew how to keep his eyes tight, his mouth shut and his wits about him. When it came to not peeping, Umsonfer was a real champion; it wasn't his talent that was useful for much else, but in this particular context it was invaluable—and it was. Ladamesansmerci, the greatest elvish sorceress in the world, had spotted it. If only she hadn't been 666 years old, the gratitude she'd expressed when he'd agreed to take on the mission would have been a good deal easier to bear.

In daylight, even in his present wretched state, Umsonfer would have covered the four miles to the world's edge in an hour. In the dark it took more than two. He never lost his footing, though, and—more importantly—he managed to see the edge before accidentally stepping over it. His candle sputtered out immediately thereafter, but that didn't matter. Although there were clouds massing in the sky behind him, the sky above the empty space that stretched away from the world's rim was much

clearer, and the sky directly in front of him was full of stars.

Although he had an elf's height, and had come to a stop no more than ten elvish paces from the world's edge, Umsonofer couldn't see whether the stars extended downward to form a vast sphere around the floating world—as orthodox opinion had it—or whether their realm came to a stop somewhere beneath the horizontal, giving way to a bottomless pit of darkness, as some minority believers asserted. He couldn't tell, either, whether the world was a flat disk like a dinner plate or the flat top of an infinitely deep column. The temptation to take a look over the edge was easily resistible for an elf with his talent for not peeking.

He took the bag containing the chalice out of his pack, and hurled it with all his might. It was a good throw; the bag sailed over the rim of the world and fell out of sight. Perhaps it would fall forever, and perhaps not. Umsonofer didn't care about that, just as long as it never came back. In spite of his headache he felt a surge of relief and a sense of triumph as he turned on his heel to head back toward civilization.

Alas, the ground gave way beneath his feet as the edge of the world suffered yet another landslip, and he found himself falling, along with a slowly disintegrating mass of stony soil and tangled vegetable matter.

At first he was lost in confusion, and the shadow of the world seemed to fill half the sky, but once Umsonofer had been falling for an hour or so—by which time panic had faded into numb acceptance of his destiny—he was able to determine a few mildly intriguing facts.

The world was definitely not the flat top of a cylindrical column; it was a disk, albeit one that wobbled much more on top than underneath, its nether surface being curved and exceedingly lumpy. Nor was the disk supported on any other structure or entity; it floated free, buoyed up against the force that had gripped Umsonofer by some mysterious counterforce. All this he could see by the light of the sun, which now seemed horizontal to his own position as it painstakingly made its way around the bottom of the world prior to rising again in the east.

The stars did not form a perfect sphere around the world—or if they did, there was something else between the nether surface of the world and the downward stars, something that was considerably broader than the world. It looked like a vast glowing mist, although he could not tell from his present height whether it glowed by its own light or merely reflected the light of the sun.

As the world continued to dwindle in the sky, until it was no more than a coin-size black circle eclipsing a mere dozen stars, Umsonofer realized how tiny and insignificant a creature he was, and how small the world was by comparison with the universe that contained it. Although he had never been a philosopher, the idea that there might be more worlds than one, scattered upon the face of infinity like seeds on a freshly plowed field, seemed slightly more relevant, as well as more likely, than it ever had before.

“Well,” he said philosophically, “I guess I'll die a wiser elf than I've lived.”

The stars were growing dimmer, though, because Umsonofer's view was compromised by the slowly spreading detritus of the landslip. When he had started to fall, the ground that had given way had all been beneath him; but as the huge clod came apart, some of the particles were rising up around

him—or, to be strictly accurate, appeared to do so because they were falling at a slightly lower speed than he was. He was gradually enveloped by a haze in which particles of dust mingled with what he first took for rain, although he eventually realized that it must be water from the stream he had followed to the world's edge—which, Umsonfer realized now, had probably been a stupid thing to do.

If he fell far enough—and he had, as yet, no particular reason to think that he might not fall forever—the debris falling with him might eventually become dense enough to blind him and choke him. In the meantime, he could probably obtain enough water to avoid dying of thirst, although hunger might be a different matter.

“Well,” the elf said, trying desperately to find a bright side to his predicament, “at least I got rid of the human doomsday weapon. Elfkind is safe—along with dwarf-kind, trollkind, and all the rest—until the world falls apart completely. Which won't be for tens of thousand of years, at the present rate of attrition. I'm a hero.”

He still had some bread and salted meat in his pocket, so he was able to make a meal while he fell—and then, as his headache eased sufficiently, he was able to go to sleep.

His dreams were pleasant enough—at least, that was the impression he had before he forgot them completely.

As he emerged by degrees from sleep—without opening his eyes—Umsonfer's first impression was that he must still be falling through empty space, but he found out quickly enough that he was lying on something solid, which felt like compacted earth. Evidently, Umsonfer thought-conscientiously applying his newfound wisdom—the philosophers who favored the idea that bodies falling in empty space did so with a constant and relatively gentle velocity were not the crazy dreamers that almost everyone assumed.

He opened his eyes, but it was pitch-dark.

“Hello?” he croaked. He had not intended to croak, but it took him some little while to moisten his mouth enough to call out more loudly. “Is anyone there?”

There was a meager trickle of light as a feeble lantern was unshielded. “Shh!” said a voice. “The little ones are trying to sleep.”

By the wan light of the lantern, Umsonfer saw a face looming out of the darkness a few feet from his own. He had never seen a human face before, except in cautionary works of art, but he had no difficulty recognizing this one for what it was—an adolescent human female—and he cried out in horror.

“It's all right,” a slightly peevish voice informed him. “You're not in the afterworld, condemned to eternal torment for the genocidal crimes of your vile species. You're in the Web, where all the world's jumpers end up—in a burrow actually, a quarter of a mile or so from where the lump that came down with you ended up. Might make a nice burrow itself, that one, although we probably won't need another for a long time to come, unless you're the first of a whole crowd. The scavengers are picking over it at present—not much in the way of edible tubers, they reckon, but plenty of nice fat worms and they'll be able to fill their bottles and skins from the waterfall while they're over that way.”

Umsonofer's eyes had adjusted to the light well enough to show him that they were in some sort of cave, thirty feet in diameter at its widest, with tunnel entrances at either end. Apart from the human adolescent there were half a dozen sleeping children lying to either side of him. He felt a pang of relief as he realized that they weren't all human. One was an elf; three were dwarfs.

"Don't get many elf jumpers in these parts," the human said. "Little Mindarofurk will be pleased to meet you, and so will Landameofurkh. I'm Isabel, by the way."

"I'm not a jumper," Umsnofer said dully. "I fell."

"You'd be surprised how many say that," Isabel told him. "It's okay to change your mind on the way down; practically everybody does. Something to do with getting the world's problems from a different perspective as you watch it shrink to insignificance, according to the oldster elves. I was born down here, of course, like all human folk for a dozen generations. And no, we're not at war with elves and dwarfs. Down here, we all work together—have to, because of the spiders. If you loathe humans as much as some of your kind, you're welcome to try your luck with the spiders, but I wouldn't recommend it."

"Giants, are they?" Umsonofer asked.

"Oh yes—but that's not the half of it. Spiders can only eat liquid food, so if they catch you they truss your arms and legs up in swathes of silk and feed you all sorts of things to fatten you up, until they shoot you full of poison that dissolves your insides, so they can suck you slowly dry. They're seriously nasty—and clever too. Hang on—here's the oldsters coming back in a hurry. They've probably got one on their tail."

As she completed the last sentence more humans began to wriggle out of both tunnel entrances, in company with dwarfs. The sole elf came last of all, making up a party of nine. All the newcomers were dragging sacks made of some kind of silk, heavy with miscellaneous plunder.

It was the elf who came to speak to Umsonofer. "I'm Landameofurkh," she said. "Has Isabel told you where you are?"

Umsonofer introduced himself. "Some kind of spider-web beneath the world," he said. "More specifically, in a burrow excavated in one of the larger lumps of earth that's recently fallen off the world's edge."

"Right," said Landameofurkh. "How are you feeling? Still want to die, or are you ready to take a second stab at life?"

"I never did want to die," Umsonofer told her. "I just came to the edge of the world to throw something off and got caught by a land. . . ." The *slip* stuck in his throat as he saw, over Landameofurkh's shoulder, one of the humans take the bag containing the poisoned chalice out of his silken sack.

"Feels like a cup," the human announced, palpating the chalice inside its container. "Can't get the bag open, though. Some kind of elvish spellseal on it. Bag might be as useful as whatever's inside, but we can get the trick of it. How about it, Landameofurkh?"

It occurred to Umsonofer that the sensible thing to do was to keep quiet, and not let on that he knew

anything about the mysterious bag—but Landameofurkh had seen the expression on his face, and he had already told her too much.

“That’s what you threw off the edge?” the elf said to him. “Why?”

“It’s a weapon,” he said, tersely. “Something too dangerous to look at. Fatal, in fact.”

“That’s silly,” said the human who was holding the bag. “Who could possibly make a weapon that was fatal to anyone who looked at it?” He was presumably descended from humans who had jumped before the last of the Magic Wars; he’d never heard of the Brotherhood of the Unseeing Eye.

“A blind man,” Umsonofer told him tersely. “Or a whole company of blind men.”

“Is that *man* in the broad sense, or the narrow sense?” the human asked, although he must have known that when an elf said “man” he invariably meant “human.”

“Don’t try to open it,” Umsonofer said. “If you have any sorcerers down here, don’t take it to them. Just let it be. In fact, if there’s a bottom side to this Webworld, just let me take it down there and drop it again.”

“Human manufacture,” said the human softly, glancing sideways at the three other adult members of his species who were present, and then at Isabel. “Not so dangerous then, considering how the Wars eventually worked out. Are you disappointed to discover that it’s only the humans on the flying island who were exterminated?”

“That’s not fair, Kasimir,” Landameofurkh objected. “Down here, we all work together. The only enemy we have is the spiders.”

“Absolutely,” Kasimir said. “And the only weapons we have are sticks and stones and a few blue knives. So if *this* one will work on spiders, it might be useful, no matter how dangerous it is to elves, dwarfs, and the like.”

“Humans too,” Umsonofer was quick to say, realizing the direction in which Kasimir’s thoughts were heading. “Humans made it, that’s true—but not until all hope of winning the war was lost. It wasn’t intended to turn the tide—it was intended to drag the other races down along with humans. *Anyone* who looks at it falls victim to it—anyone with the intelligence to be deluded by its glamor. It wouldn’t work against a spider, though, no matter how big.”

Kasimir thought about it for a moment before saying: “You can’t know that. You can’t know that it kills humans, if you elves didn’t find it until the last human in the world was already dead—and you can’t know that it won’t kill the spiders down here, since we know far better than you how smart they are. But Landameofurkh’s right—down here, we all work together, so I don’t want you or anyone else endangered. We can test both questions at the same time, if you’ll tell me the spellkey. Three spiders chased us away from the fresh fall and they’re prowling around outside right now. One of us—one of us humans, that is—can take the bag to the burrow entrance, and open it there. If it kills the spiders but not the man, we’ll finally have the means to turn the tide in this long losing battle of ours. If it kills the spiders *and* the man, someone with his eyes tight shut will have to put it back in the bag, and we’ll have to make careful plans for its future use. If it kills the man but not the spiders, then I agree with you that it’s useless, and we’ll drop it off the bottom of the world—but we have to try. We got a lot more jumpers in the old days than we do nowadays, and we’ve been dying faster than our kids are born for twenty years and more.”

Umsonofer told his new allies that it wasn't as simple as that, but they wouldn't believe him. They argued for a long time, but Kasimir was implacable. He was determined to try the experiment, even if he had to keep his eyes shut while he did so; like most humans, he had been born a philosopher.

If Kasimir had been an elf, or even a dwarf, Umsonofer would have tried harder to talk him out of it, but Umsonofer's own feelings were more mixed now than they had ever been before. Isabel might think that it was elfkind that was unutterably vile and worthy of eternal torment, but elfkind didn't see things that way at all, and Umsonofer had been carrying the human doomsday weapon in his pack for far too long. He even contrived, in the end, to tell himself that the glamor might not work down here in a society that plainly had no use for gold and precious gems.

"All right," Umsonofer said finally. "You can take it to the burrow entrance and try it on the spider—but I'll be right behind you in the tunnel. If it doesn't work, the chalice is going straight back into the bag until I can figure out a way of getting rid of it for good. And if you value your life, you'll keep your eyes shut—no peeking."

When the time came, Umsonofer crept along the tunnel in Kasimir's wake, until the human stopped. The tunnel was just about wide enough for Umsonofer to squeeze past the human to recover the cup, but things went as badly awry as he expected—and once he had got it back into the bag, he would have time to take stock of the situation before deciding what to do next.

He whispered the spellkey, to make sure that no one but Kasimir would obtain the dead information—and then he closed his eyes, as he had done so many times before.

When the human went limp, and his sphincter muscles relaxed, Umsonofer felt a curious shiver pass along his own body, which was not entirely composed of fatalistic sadness. There was something in him that was not displeased to have proof that the human doomsday weapon really did work on humans too. He squeezed past the corpse and began groping about for the chalice of death and its protective container.

Neither of them was anywhere to be felt.

Umsonofer moved farther and farther forward, unable to judge how far he had emerged from the burrow's entrance, or what kind of menace might be lurking there.

He knew he had overreached, though, when he was roughly seized at the shoulders by a pair of massive jaws, as strong and precise as magic-tempered bronze, which dragged his lower body from its protective hole like an ill-fitting cork from a bottle. He felt something akin to a broad needle stab him in the back of the neck.

Umsonofer woke to find his arms and legs trussed up tight—not bound together but separately glued to rope-like strands that stretched him out like a letter X. He remembered what Isabel had said about the spiders fattening their victims up before liquefying their insides, and wondered how long the business of food-preparation would last.

He wondered, too, whether it might be best not to open his eyes, given that he had no idea where the chalice was, but decided in the end that he had little enough to lose.

He had not expected the spiders to be quite as abominable as they were. They were as big

elephants, with much longer and hairier legs. They were black as night, and there was something in the way they moved, so smoothly and silently, that flooded his consciousness with pure fear. Their heads seemed surprisingly *sticky*, their tentacular palps—each as big and flexible as the limbs of a giant octopus—glistening with what might have been saliva. Their multitudinous eyes glowed crimson.

Hung up as he was, above the upper plane of the web, on a dendritic frame of some kind, Umsonfer could see at least forty spiders at various distances. Only two of them were studying him at close range, but that was more than enough. He had been unlucky enough in the course of his life to encounter half a dozen ghouls, three ogres, two chimeras, and a mad dog, not to mention various would-be assassins of the dwarf and goblin species, but he had always been able to turn on his heels and run like hell, ultimately outdistancing his adversaries. He had never seen anything half as awful as one of these spiders, and had never experienced such utter helplessness.

By way of distraction, the elf wondered whether the web was a sort of world, floating like his own in the ether, or whether it was the bottom layer of all existence, stretching like an aerialist's safety net from one end of the universe to the other, set to catch the detritus of a whole host of slowly disintegrating worlds. There had to be some such bottom layer, he supposed, given that the worlds *were* disintegrating, and that streams and rivers would be ceaselessly carrying their water away even if the solid ground were more secure than it was. Was the water recycled somehow? Perhaps it was pumped up the walls of the universe so that it might fall again as rain onto the world or worlds. Perhaps, on the other hand, there was an infinite number of layers to the universe, through which everything was ceaselessly falling, periodically molded into worlds and set afloat by creatures with kinder habits than the Web's top predators.

In spite of his best efforts, though, Umsonfer could not bring himself to care. He was a philosopher now, by choice as well as necessity, but the consolations of philosophy still seemed very meager.

In the end, he looked the nearest spider in its many eyes, and said: "I could do with something to drink. If you're going to fatten me up, you'd best not let me die of thirst before you start, or there'll be nothing left of me but a shriveled husk by the time you want to drink me."

He hadn't expected the spider to understand elvish speech, but it seemed to take heed of what he said. It actually turned away, as if to search for something—and then it went toward something that was lying on the ground twenty elvish paces from the frame on which it had strung up its victim.

Umsonfer recognized the bag containing the poisoned chalice. It was still bulging.

He realized then what must have happened back at the burrow. After reciting the spellkey, Kasim had been unable to resist the temptation to peek inside the bag before taking the chalice out. He had seen it—but he had been so enthusiastic to lift it to his lips to drink he had lifted the bag with it. When it had fallen from his grasp, the open bag must have enveloped it again, rendering it invisible . . . but not inaccessible.

A spider had picked it up—and one of its companions had then picked Umsonfer up. The spider had not yet caught sight of the doomsday weapon—but now, as his captor cast about for something which to bring him a little liquid to quench his thirst, Umsonfer was finally about to confront himself.

"Oh well," the elf murmured, unable to suppress a wry smile, "at least it'll be quick, if I do get to drink from it."

He didn't. As soon as the spider's inquisitive palps had tumbled the chalice from its packaging, the monster paused as if hypnotized, and every one of its myriad vermilion eyes seemed to be staring madly. Umsonofer realized, as magical appetite surged through him like an internal tide, that he might yet have a deal of suffering still to do, given that his chances of slaking that murderous thirst now seemed very small indeed.

The spiders, on the other hand, had every opportunity to slake *their* thirst. As connoisseurs of liquid food, they obviously found the inexhaustible nectar of the cup to be exceedingly tasteful. The spider that had released the cup drank deep, and was then shunted aside by another. Then there were twenty struggling to get to the weirdly glowing object—and after that, Umsonofer lost count.

He also lost sight of the chalice, which gave him some slight relief from his own inexpressible torment.

For obvious reasons, Umsonofer had never witnessed one of the brawls that followed the periodic unveiling of his dubious prize, but his ears had always assured him that they were relatively unviolent affairs, presumably because elves, dwarfs, and the like had thirsts appropriate to the size of their stomachs, and were not long delayed in slaking them. The spiders were huge, and had thirsts to match the delay involved in waiting for each drinker to finish became intolerable to its impatient rivals with astonishing rapidity, and the spiders were predators, lacking the refined discretion characteristic of omnivores. Newcomers arrived on the scene at a faster rate than poisoned spiders died, and the struggles of the swarm grew increasingly agitated.

It was not a situation that could endure for long, though. Something had to give—and what gave was the delicately spun but ancient web. Overladen with creatures that were normally wary of overmuch congregation, a whole section of it gave way, and fell away just as the stream-weakened land at the edge of Umsonofer's world had fallen away.

The chalice fell too, without the hapless elf ever catching sight of it again. The dendritic structure which he was attached was left on the lip of the hole.

When the elf finally felt better, he looked downward with some interest. There were no stars to be seen in the depths of the hole, but there was something down there like a soft white mist, stretching as far as the eye could see in every direction. Another web, perhaps? Or authentic cloud? Who could tell without actually jumping down? And who was likely to do that, unless and until desperation drove them to it?

"The chance would be a fine thing," Umsonofer muttered glumly, wishing that he had a drink of perfectly ordinary water.

They did not come to find him for at least twenty-four hours, but they did come in the end, wondering at the scarcity of spiders—and the consequent abundance of recoverable loot—for many miles around. They found him barely alive, but not so barely that he could not be revived and cut free, and assisted to tell his story.

Eventually the entire party gathered around the rim of the hole to look down into the vast abyss they had swallowed up so many of their enemies. It was a moment made for philosophy.

"They'll be back, of course," said Landameofurkh sadly. "They'll breed, and occupy the territory again, and we'll be right back where we were, struggling to survive."

“But a breathing space is a breathing space,” Isabel observed. “We’ll be able to tell our grandchildren about this, so they’ll know that the spiders *can* be defeated, provided that there are heroes brave enough to try.”

It was a very human thing to say, but Umsonfer found himself nodding his head. “And we’ll have reinforcements in the meantime,” he said. “As long as the world keeps falling apart, there’ll be jumpers—and as long as they have far enough to fall, they’ll always change their minds on the way down. And fallers too, of course . . . but I hope I’m the last of my kind of hero. I’d hate to think of raining poisoned chalices for the next ten thousand years.”

“I don’t understand about that,” Isabel said, furrowing her horrid brow as only a human could. “How did it keep filling up again? Where did all the poison come from?”

“I’m the kind of person who can always resist the temptation to peek,” Umsonfer told her, “so I’m not really equipped for philosophy—but I’ve seen a lot more of the universe than most philosophers have. One thing it’s not short of is ingenious ways to kill people—and yes, I do mean *people* in the broad sense, not in the narrow one. The old world’s just a crumbling flying island, and we live on the shore of infinity now. If we have to go farther down, in the end, we might as well all go down together.”

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