

Another Encounter with the Grave

by Brandon M. Dennis

It was a death-snow that Tal-Haman trudged through. All around him the world was ashen gray. Dusk had settled and night was looming. The snow that covered the earth all around him and every tree within sight was suffocating, and nothing could be heard but the *plip! plop!* of heavy snow falling from over-laden branches. The sky was cloudless and the sun had now fully set. Bright stars began to fade into being, and Tal felt evermore cold. He pulled his beast-hide coat tight, but little did it help to ward off the chill. His thickly wrapped legs were wet despite all his effort, and his back was bent and weary. His breath billowed out like smoke and lingered before slowly vanishing into the air. All his mind was set on moving one leg after the other; nothing else concerned him. As long as his legs still moved, he was safe. As long as he could focus on his task, the pain did not bother him.

He climbed a soft slope and his feet sank deep into the snow. The trees were getting thicker and soon the stars above him vanished. Noises of cracking and falling and breaking were everywhere, and Tal often looked up nervously. A hill loomed before him, and the hill grew steadily bigger. He was not where he should be; this hill should not have been here. He was making for the bridge of Suphah, south of the Great Way, but here he was at the roots of a small chain of mountains, the Spine of Macerios, and he was too far east of his destination. He decided that to walk anymore this night would be walking blind, and so he aimed for the hill before him.

Dark things littered the hillside which was void of any tree; not even stumps could be seen. Large rocks and boulders loomed before him, and they seemed to form a hedge that ferried him along a hidden path. Up he climbed as he looked for a place to rest, but the rocks were too sheer and offered little protection and no warmth. Suddenly to his right he noticed another dark place, but this one seemed thicker and deeper. To his delight he realized that it was a small cave – perhaps a place where a large rock had dislodged itself, or maybe an animal had delved this hole, or maybe it was man made. However it was formed, Tal was grateful, and he climbed inside and lay down.

He closed his eyes and the world spun by. He could hear a wind start up in his sleep and it disturbed his dreams. His body grew colder and colder, and soon he couldn't feel his arms or legs. It began snowing again, and the wind blew it north. The entrance to his hole began to get smaller and smaller, as snow piled upon snow. At last the entrance was closed, and all became dark, but still he could hear the wind. As his mind wavered in and out of knowing, he thought he could discern voices in the wind, or perhaps they had been voices all along. No, it was more like one voice, a soft, windy voice, a voice that—

“*Mmm*, I am pleased that you have come, *mmm...*”

It was coming from behind him, in the dark void of the hole.

“I have been without company for long, yes, and here you are, *mmm*, when I did not expect you, no.” Tal opened his eyes. Nothing seemed strange to him.

“It is not for your sake that I came here,” he said, but his voice clenched and he wheezed. Laughter filled the hole.

“I smell death upon you, yes, death upon your face, *mmm*. Many have come here to die and always they smell like you.”

“I did not come here to die, fell voice, I came here to live.”

“As did they all! he-he, all come to live. *mmm*, but I cant let them do that can I, no, I mustn't.”

Tal heard a scraping and a scratching from behind him, and in the darkness he thought he discerned a long, thin hand reaching for him in the dark. It crackled and popped and seemed to speak in its own voice. It spoke of murder and death and coldness, always coldness.

“I will not die here,” said Tal as well as he could. “It is not my time to die and so I wont.”

“But you cant help death, no, it is sneaky, it creeps and crawls and, *mmm*, lays waste, not at the permission of men, no. It robs and takes; a thief it is, yes. Thieves do not need permission, no, and so it is with death, *mmm*.”

“You seem to know death well,” said Tal, and the scratchy voice laughed.

“Well indeed, *mmm*, too well, long companions we be, yes, long companions.”
The hand had reached him now and seemed to pass through him.

“What are you groping at, fell voice?” asked Tal, but he knew, he could feel it. Slowly his articulation left him, and his face paled, and his blood turned cold. He felt as if he was being extracted, pulled though the eye of a needle. His muscles failed and his eyes rolled back. With all that was left of his strength, he uttered the only Name he knew to utter, and in a language he did not know, nor did he ever know. The hand within him trembled and his blood grew warm and his mind grew sharp. The hand recoiled viciously and there was a scuffling in the cave, and a wheezing.

“I did not know you were a servant of He!” hissed the voice, and it gurgled and spat and whined and cried. “Cheated I am, yes, cheated from my meal! *mmm*, All who come here perish; this is my domain! *mmm*.”

“The domain you own was given to you by He, and it can be taken away at will,” said Tal sternly. “You are not the Master, but only the servant, and *we* have more authority than you.” Tal began to feel thawed. The snow covering the opening grew light and the cave was slightly illuminated. Tal looked behind him and no one was there. But still the wind blew.

“All men are mortal, yes, and it has been appointed unto men to die once, *mmm*. You are mine; it is only a matter of time, and then I shall reach inside you again and pull you into the Other World, *mmm*.”

The wind died down, and only an echo could now be heard. Tal could feel the hollowness of the hole and it disturbed him. He kicked the snow covering before him and it crumbled freely. Tal stepped out of the cave and lo! the sun was high in the sky and the air was warm. The snow around him was melting, and he could hear a loud trickling nearby. He was assailed by droplets falling from the leaves and branches high above, but they did not bother him, for he was alive. His heart was light and he marched on, south, always south, and sang a new song that he had never sung before. The sun arched high above and birds emerged to join him in song. And the Name was on his lips.