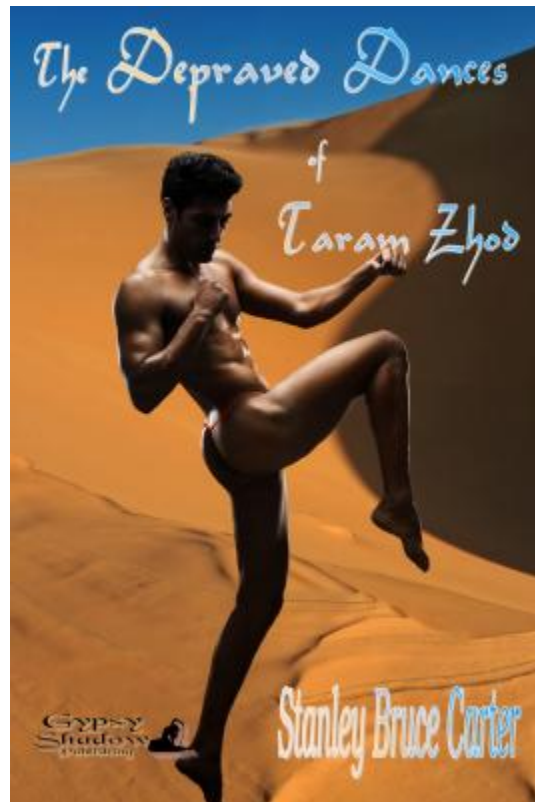


The hottest dancer on the planet tries to stay one step ahead of two covetous queens in this wild steampunk satire.



The Depraved Dances of Taram Zhod

<http://www.gypsyshadow.com/StanCarter.html#Dances>

FREE EXCERPT

After everyone was seated and Lilly's grrls had finished exchanging murderous glares with their counterparts across the aisle, the house lights dimmed and the

spotlights on the stage winked on. Canned music from a phonograph began playing over speakers.

And everything else was forgotten as Taram Zhod stepped onto the stage, wearing nothing but his scarlet silk thong. That alone brought a whoop of delight from the crowd before he even began his dance. And when he did ...

Lelly's heart skipped a beat and her breath caught in her throat as Taram Zhod launched into an astonishing series of cabriojetes. Then he unleashed (there was no better word for it) some moves of such power and skill that only a member of the Yasha Four could do them—a dizzying array blending pirouettes and glissades and entrechats, plus some stuff Lelly didn't even recognize.

Yet the most astonishing part of the performance wasn't Taram's feet or legs or arms or hips, but the complex gestures of his hands and the expressions on his face—the arching of his eyebrows and the glimmer in his eyes and the twist of his lips—expressions conveying an amazing variety of subtle meanings, all of them seductive, almost pornographic.

Lelly had been shocked by the dance at the desert encampment, but this was even worse—or better, depending on one's moral sensibilities. And Zhod was much closer now, no longer a small figure seen through the eyepiece of a spyglass; she could make out individual drops of sweat (or was it oil?) on his body, and the fine hair on his legs, and the gold flecks in his coppery eyes, and the sheen on his pecs.

She soon forgot about the enemy across the aisle; forgot about her mission; forgot how much she disapproved of this sort of dancing. She was aware of only three things in the world: the man before her, the indescribable ache in her heart, and the unseemly seething in her loins.

She began to squirm, her breath coming out in shudders. Her palms got damp and itchy; how she longed to stroke Taram's chest, to clasp his arms and pull his body down on top of hers...

And then it ended. Lelly wasn't sure how many dances Taram performed, or how long the show lasted. But suddenly the house lights came on and Taram was trotting off stage and the room was engulfed in deafening applause and raucous shrieks, and then dozens of security men poured out of the wings—armed with stun wands that resembled very long fly swatters—forming a human (and troll and goblin) barrier between the stage and the audience.

Several dozen diehard fans surged toward the barrier, but the guards held firm, dispelling the wave of women, and soon the audience began to calm down, the shrieking and clapping subsiding into a fervent chant:

"Taram! Taram!"

After a minute or so, a voice finally cut in on the intercom: "Thanks for coming out tonight, ladies. Taram has left the building."

"Awww," went the crowd.

The spell was broken now, and the becalmed fans began to chatter and giggle as they gathered up their things and prepared to leave.

But no giggles came from the soldier grrls, who suddenly remembered why they were there. Their heads turned slowly toward their counterparts on the other side of the room. Eyes narrowed. Jaws clenched.

But the club owners had anticipated the situation. The intercom came on again, the man sounding slightly bored as he mumbled an obviously prepared speech he must have delivered many times before: "If our extra special guests from the armed forces would please go to the side exits nearest them, we can keep the central aisles clear for the civilians to depart. Your weapons will be brought to you after you're

outside. This is for the mutual safety of all concerned, and is standard operating procedure throughout the City of Lost Vargas. Thanks for your cooperation and please visit the Tophet Club again soon."

"You heard the man, move!" Lelly shouted—at the exact moment the Lib captain said the same thing.

The rival commanders stood there glaring at each other across the aisle as their grrls surged around them like breakers around river rocks, knocking over chairs and shoving aside tables. After a few seconds Lelly turned away, sprinting to catch up with her troopers.

The grrls exploded out the side door and sprinted to the rented spring-cycles lined up in the parking lot, and Lelly heard the Libs on the far side of the building, their boots slapping on the pavement as they, too, rushed to their motorized mounts.

Lelly climbed onto her own cycle, yanking up the hem of her robe and stomping down on the winding pedal, feeling slightly ridiculous—what a puny conveyance this was, compared to a fire-breathing war beast! But dragocorns and crustaccas were banned within the city limits—and at least the Libs were at the same disadvantage.

Her troopers impatiently gunned their throttles, the *twoing-twoing* of the auto-rewinders quickly getting on Lelly's nerves.

"Where the hell are the weapons?" she muttered, glancing at her pocket watch.

A male goblin guard appeared a few seconds later, lugging a big burlap sack.

"Come on, slowpoke," Pappota said, "get the lead out!"

The guard gave her a dirty look. So did Lelly.

"Pappota, don't just sit there on your fat ass barking orders, go help the man!"

Pappota climbed off her cycle and raced across the lot, grabbing the sack from the guard and yanking it open like a kid pouncing on Sanda Kloss's toy bag. She pulled out the wands and tossed them to the troopers, who adroitly caught them and hastily shoved them into their sheaths.

"Okay, grrls, listen up!" Lelly said. "There's no telling what kind of vehicle Zhod is riding in, and you won't be able to stop everyone, so you'll just have to keep your eyes peeled and trust your instincts. The guy gives off some strong vibes, so try to pick up on that, and remember, he might be hiding in the boot of a taxi or the back of a truck or wearing a disguise or none of the above. Just don't cause any accidents while you're looking, and don't piss off any innocent motorists. And above all, try to avoid the Libs if you can."

"What if the Libs get in our way?" Trooper Pappota said.

"Then push them out of the way if you have to. But only use your wands as a last resort. If we get ourselves banned from the city the whole damn army will come down on our asses—and I'm talking about our own troops, not the Libs. Understood?"

The troopers nodded.

Lelly turned to Trooper Burke.

"Burke, you stay here and watch the stage door. That PA guy might've lied about Zhod leaving. If he's still here he may try to duck out when he thinks the coast is clear. If he does, grab him."

A naughty grin broke out on Burke's angelic face. "Yes, *Ma'am!*"

Lelly turned to her other grrls and gestured toward the street. "Okay, troopers, let's move out!"

The soldiers rolled out of the lot and poured into the street, nearly colliding with a group of Libs as they reached the first intersection. Lelly gestured to the

right, guiding her grrls into an alley to avoid trouble. The Libs veered off to the left at the same time, shouting obscenities over their shoulders.

As the Loys burst out the other side of the alley, Lelly made a twirling motion over her head and the cycles began fanning out in all directions like a bursting firecracker.

Lelly cringed as she watched the troopers maneuver the unfamiliar cycles through traffic, slaloming around vehicles with only inches to spare and staring intently at the drivers instead of keeping one eye on the road. Two grrls almost collided with each other, then overcorrected, nearly swerving into the paths of oncoming trucks.

Lelly sighed. Unless some minor miracle occurred, the streets of Lost Vargas would soon be in a shambles, full of crumpled vehicles, smashed cycles, wounded grrls—or worse.

And all because of one dancing boy. Was he worth it?

Her thoughts drifted back to his performance, the gyrating of his hips, the glitter in his eyes, the devilish grin on his ripe lips, the beads of sweat—or was it oil?—streaking his muscular chest.

Oh yeah. He was worth it.

Damn right.

The Full at:

<http://www.gypsyshadow.com/StanCarter.html#Dances>

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