

# TANITH LEE

## These Beasts

[29 dec 2001—proofed and reformatted for #bookz]

He was a tomb robber. Well, when you were dead, you were dead.

All came to it. The mighty in their gold and gems, the impoverished unknown, wrapped in rags, their legs broken to fit the grave. And even he, Carem, would one day die. He did not mind if someone robbed him, after death. Welcome, my friend.

It was this life that counted.

Oh, he had been born as no one in the splendid city among the pink rocks. Noom Dargh, once the seat of kings, but no longer. He had been a whore's son, sold at three months to be another whore. At ten, evading the man who was his owner—spuriously charming, as Carem had learned to be, they all trusted him—he made off with traders. He was quick as fire. Handsome too.

Among the traders he learned his profession.

The caravan routes went all ways. And in the yellow deserts, stood up the strange bulbous stones, caught forever in mid-topple.

"What is that place?"

"Ah, we will show him." It was a place of tombs.

They went by night. No moon. Things howled in the desert, but he

was not afraid. No, not until they breached the stinking hotness of the rock and the bats, which laired there, poured outward—Then the man who liked Carem consoled him. "There's nothing here to hurt you. But look—what's that which shines?" What shone was gold, contrary to so many proverbs.

By the time he was a man, Carem had gained much knowledge, and some wealth. Let it be said, the wealth came from others and the knowledge was all to do with thievery. But Carem did not harm the living. No, he was kind to them. He gave to beggars in the street, and was generous with the girls he dighted.

By his twenty-eighth year, he had a house on the edge of Noom Dargh, a house with gardens and channels of water, a house with courtyards and dove-cotes, and awnings embroidered by gold.

He had also two wives, Bisint, who was rich, and Zulmia, who was beautiful.

In the city they spoke of him with respect. No one publicly remembered anymore what he did. Indeed, he did not do it, for now other men worked on his behalf, and brought him treasures by night through a secret walk in the starry garden.

Lucky Carem. A life from death.

One sunset as, half a mile away below his mansion, the city turned blood-red and the desert scarlet, someone came seeking Carem; would speak only to him.

They met on a shady terrace and drank fig wine.

"I hurried straight to you, sir," said the visitor, a traveler from

antique lands. "You alone could do it."

"Do what?"

"Get in, get out. It needs skill and wisdom. It needs knowledge of such things."

"What things are they?"

The traveler smiled. "They call yours a bestial career, but I say one does what one is good at."

"You mean my shares in merchant enterprise."

"No. Your tomb-robbery."

Carem said, smiling too, "Have I been insulted?"

"Not at all. You're known as a master. And this, believe me, who would not dare it, needs a master's touch."

"You may explain. For purposes of amusement. If I laugh enough, you shall have gold to fill one hand, and sufficient silver to fill two."

"Treble that. You will find you'll laugh your head off, Lord Carem."

Then the traveler spoke of an ancient country, once astride the world, and now come down to ruination. Its great obsession, this land, had been the burial of its kings and princes—of whom there were many—in the most sumptuous and enduring manner. And, too, in deepest secret. Now and then one of these burial spots would be thought to have been discovered. Then everyone went mad. And, often as not, since they were usually also wrong, venturers came back with nothing but sore bones and empty wallets.

"This I have, however," said the traveler, "is not only sure—and I can give you proof—it is infallible. Besides which, it is known.

Spoken and dreamed of, a thing of sparkle and nightmare."

"Is there the normal curse, then, on the tomb?" asked Carem, indolently. Had he been a fox, his ears would have stood up high enough to touch the awning overhead.

"A curse known as familiarly as the tomb. Indeed, the tomb is named for it. There in the waste beyond the pastures of the River Khenemy."

"Oh, is it Stone-Beard's Palace? That was pillaged three years ago. So I've been led to believe."

"Not there."

"The Garden of Arches, then? That too. And only a wisp of gold got from it."

"Not there."

"More wine?" inquired Carem. "A cake?"

"Yes, I will take more wine. The burial place I offer you is the Tomb of the Black Dog."

Then Carem, despite the last trace of the sunset, paled. His eyes opened and closed, and opened. He said, "Surely that is only a story."

"Till now. Now it can be yours."

"And your proof."

Then the traveler took a purse out of his clothing and out of the purse he drew a narrow gleaming snake. This he set on the terrace, where, after two or three convulsive movements, it brought up out of its jaws a small black egg.

The egg sat on the paving.

The traveler spoke a word that fell like a raw hot drop of unseasonal rain.

The egg burst, and there lay a tiny black figure of a dog at rest, its head erect, and its throat rimmed by gold.

"A copy of the image that guards the tomb?"

"Found in the sand not twenty paces from the area."

Muttering a protective charm, Carem picked up the figurine and held it. It was unearthly cold. He put it down. It cast no shadow, turn it as he would.

"Tell me all you know," said Carem.

The traveler did so. Presently much gold and silver was given over in handfuls.

At midnight they parted, the traveler and Carem, and Carem went prudently to sleep with his plain wife, Bisint, for in the morning he would be going away.

The Journey to Khenemy took several months, longer than was ordinarily needful, since Carem undertook the end of it in disguise, as a poor lame pilgrim, seeker of the shrines of the holy river.

Many tiresome days Carem spent, smothered by dust and ringing his irritating little pilgrim's bell at the gates of collapsed temples, until at last, moved apparently by that mystic urge which drives prophets and seers, he wandered out into the desert waste.

The desert of Khenemy was like no other.

Where the River was, emerald pastures swelled, with cows and cameloids feeding beneath palms heavy with dates, and lime green banana trees. Then there lay the strips of fields, and sacred groves, and thereafter the first of the waste, brown as an egg where, in caves, the former inhabitants of old fallen cities lived, lighting at night their fires and lamps of horn, like yellow stars felled to the land.

After this, a place opened that was like hell.

The land was white, and blistered the soles through your boots, the sun was a ball of white matter, and the sky white, and here and there rose monuments of the race of Khenemy, which had passed away. Statue men a hundred feet tall, wielding swords of stone, towers and gateways that led nowhere, all blasted by a hot moistureless wind, the breath of something long dead.

Carem, though, had a map. Not to hand, but written accurately in his head.

So he trekked by day the burning waste, and slept by night under the suns of other indifferent worlds. And on the second evening, he reached a sort of cliff. And in the eastern front of it was a mark, that looked only natural, but not to him. It was like the face of a dog.

No time like the present

Carem went to the cliff and stared hard, and saw how the rock was. Then he put up his agile right "lame" foot, and lifted himself. From the first step he discovered the second. They were set oddly, and were not safe. He negotiated them all, with only a little powdering of dust to show his passage.

Above, far up, the cliff was flat as a stone table.

Once there, it was possible to look for miles, and see nothing but the nighttime desert, with here and there, one of its ghastly monuments.

Instead Carem looked and saw a hag seated by a round hole in the stone.

"Stay," said the hag. "Let me tell you what you risk."

"Very well," said Carem.

"Once I was very young," said the hag. "That might be said of all of us."

"I traveled here," continued the hag, humorlessly. "I sought to enter the Tomb of the Black Dog. Aieeee! I did not know. I thought it the burial place of some great king, guarded by that fearsome guardian, Anubar, the Biter of Souls."

Carem nodded.

The hag said, "Know, it is the Tomb of the Black Dog Himself. So we discovered to our cost. He Himself lies buried here, that guardian invoked in so many other places."

Carem shivered, but it was only the heat.

"Thus all of you died, granny, and you're a ghost."

"Nay," said granny, "me alone He let live. But see," and she opened her robe with her left hand to reveal horrid scars and omissions. "He tore off my right arm and my right breast. I am His warning"

"Thank you," said Carem. "Now you have warned me you may be off."

The hag got up and walked away. She cast no shadow. That too the

Black Dog had torn from her. She went down the cliff by another way, invisible to ordinary persons.

Oh, he was not alarmed. Not Carem.

He sat by the black hole in the stone and took a pipe from his garments. On this he blew. It made no noise.

It would sound however a few hours' journey away, at the spot to which he had earlier sent the men who would help him at the tomb. He had now merely to wait.

He first anointed himself from a phial, then stretched out in the hot night. The dead breath of the wind lulled him. He slept.

When the moon rose, the jingle of harness conveniently roused him again, and sitting up, he beheld the twenty men he had hired, who had gathered at the foot of the cliff.

Carem rose and poured onto the stone of the tomb some wine and oil.

"What are you doing?" demanded one of the men below among the cameloids.

"Making the first offering," said Carem. "Come up now, as I will direct you."

Up they came. A mixed bag they were. Some aristocratic and anxious, others pure fresh scum. They crowded around him, and Carem pointed to the hole.

"The rope I have readied. Who will be first down into the tomb?"

No one thrilled at the chance.

Carem said, "This gold piece, to the first."



After this there were some offers.

Presently three men climbed down, one after the other.

"What do you see?"

"Darkness."

"Yes, that's as it should be."

Then Carem went down and the others followed him.

In the tomb, Carem struck a light, and lit a torch.

It was very hot, as Carem was well used to, but no bats laired there. Nothing lived in that enclosure. Not even a spider or a beetle. Bones there were, however, on the floor.

The walls were brown, and painted dimly by a massive figure that had the head of a long-nosed black dog. At this the crew pointed uneasily.

Carem drew from his clothes a small dark bottle. He spilled out its contents on the stone floor. Fluid ran, and formed a pattern. It was a map, in liquid, of the tomb.

Just at that moment came a low soft growl.

The hired men, most of them, bleated with alarm.

But, "It's only magic," said one.

"Exactly so," said Carem. "You are meant to fear it and run away empty-handed. Think of the treasures that lie in the inner chambers."

The men were somewhat consoled. They rubbed their amulets and muttered.

"Do you see that door," said Carem, consulting his liquid map, "who will go through first?"

There was great rivalry as to who would not.

While they argued something came rushing.

It was like a wind, or five hundred hounds, packed close as fish in a shoal, running after game.

The man nearest the door was one minute there, and then his head was off. It was wrenched from his shoulders. Next the fellow beside him was disemboweled, and another split from throat to crotch. All this was done by an agency invisible.

With quick screams, and sometimes so swift there was no time for that either, the twenty men of Carem's hire landed in pieces and bits on the floor, where the bones of previous victims lay.

But Carem, who had anointed himself with a certain thing repellant to all dogs, was not touched.

When the last man had had his throat torn out, a low satisfied growl rang round the space.

"Thus I make the second offering" said Carem.

Then he walked through the dark door without being molested, and through thirteen passages, right up to the farthest wall. There he kneeled and felt with his hands by the light of his torch.

Soon he made out a round door no higher than a child of three, and no wider than said child lying sideways.

Through that Carem crawled, and so entered the treasure vault.

There was just enough light to behold.

The room was stuffed with gold, and jewels, green and crimson, blue and white. But everything was on a little scale, even the

emeralds no larger than a thumbnail, and the golden effigies of dogs and wolves, foxes and jackals, were the size of acorns and peach stones.

Carem filled the bags inside his clothes, his boots, his loin-pouch. He opened the ready purses at his neck and waist. He put things into his mouth, and up his nostrils, and in his ears, and elsewhere, which shall be nameless.

Take as you find.

On the wall of this last room, which was a sort of kennel, was painted no dog, but a black eye. Carem took no obvious notice of it as he screwed a ruby into his navel. Sucking a last golden standing jackal with diamond eyes between his lips, Carem crawled back out of the inner place.

He had accrued a great amount, yet a greater was left. Let that, then, be the third offering: his temperance. For the rest, he would have reputation. That was worth a vaster amount than the stones themselves.

Back through the thirteen passages he waddled. In the outer passage he waddled. In the outer place, he stepped fastidiously over the bones.

He stood a moment listening.

Somewhere something howled, but it was, as usual, on the desert outside.

Carem climbed the rope, awkwardly, and emerged into the boiling air, which was itself like the interior of a grave.

On the table top of the tomb, huge black paw marks were apparent

in the moonlight, and overhead the mass of stars seemed to describe, for a moment, the skull of a dog.

Carem pulled up the rope, and spoke a word. The entry to the tomb, the hole, vanished.

Below the cliff most of the cameloids had run off. But a few remained, trembling and farting with fear. He would sell them at a handy village. Well, a shame to waste.

When he got down from the cliff, Carem turned about on the sand, clanking and clinking from his weight of jewels and gold.

There on the smooth ground lay something black, pointing from him and away from the moon. He had kept his shadow. All was well.

On his return home, plain Bisint tactfully sent word that she was out of sorts, and beautiful Zulmia met Carem in the garden, plump as a white plum and garlanded with blue-black hair. Much joy he had of her, under the roses and lemon trees, while bees buzzed and the honeyed sun slowly set into the uncomplicated pink desert of Noom Dargh.

He did not tell Zulmia, or even Bisint, anything of his exploits, nor did he give them anything from his robbery. Instead he brought Zulmia a rope of pearls and sapphires to match her skin and eyes, and Bisint a rope of topaz to match her teeth.

The treasure of the tomb Carem sold carefully and meagerly. Soon nobles and lords sent word to him, and later might come the words of kings. He would be famous now. He would be feared as well as praised.

Zulmia approached her husband modestly. She told him, as if he, not she, had been clever, that she was with child.

"I am sure it's a boy, masterful husband. Only a male would spring from your loins."

Carem was pleased, for never before, to his knowledge, had he reproduced himself.

He looked delightedly at his lovely wife, plumper than ever, her hair like silk, and at her feet her jet black shadow. All was wonderfully well.

How charmingly the days and nights passed then. Even Bisint was helpful, often ailing, and keeping to her rooms. If she should die, all her wealth would come to Carem.

He would think now, upon sunny evenings, watching the final noose of light about the towers of the city below, how he might give up for good his profession. How he might turn to other things, from which none would dare refuse him entry. His son, after all, should inherit a business, not merely an empire of robbery.

On the night of the full moon, eight months later, Bisint peacefully passed away.

In a generous spirit, Carem left her her topazes to be buried in.

It was midday, and beautiful Zulmia had gone into labor. From the arbor where Carem sat drinking pomegranate wine, the house was closely visible, and her screams of pain might now and then be heard. They were good, rounded, healthy screams. It seemed the birth was going perfectly.

Carem saw a woman approaching through his gardens. He took her

for a servant bringing roast lamb and date leaves. He smiled and poured a little wine on the ground, an old custom, for the child to be. Something caught Carem's eye then. It was his fine dark shadow. How bold it was. How black.

Carem studied this. He noticed, oh yes, that some curious arrangement of the awning or the arbor trees, had caused his shadow to take on a peculiar shape. It had two upright ears. Its nose was very long.

As Carem was pondering this, the servant woman came up to him. She was not his servant, but a squat female, veiled, with the sun shining through her. Around her neck gleamed faintly a rope of yellow stones.

"I am your dead wife," said Bisint's uncomely ghost, unnecessarily.

"I have arrived to warn you."

"That was most kind. Of what?"

"Hark."

Carem harkened, and heard another loud scream from the house.

"Yes," said Carem. "That is Zulmia."

"Indeed," said Bisint, "and she does well to scream. O stupid Carem, what did you bring away from the Tomb of the Black Dog?"

It was random to lie to or upbraid a ghost. "Some trinkets," he replied.

"What else, O stupid Carem?"

"Nothing."

"Yes."

"Only I, myself."

"Stupid, stupid Carem," emphasized Bisint, and disappeared.

Carem looked down for his shadow, that had pointed ears and a snout. It too had vanished.

A particularly awful scream rocked through the air.

Carem glanced at his mansion.

Zulmia's windows, which were hung with crystal clear cloth, turned suddenly violently red. More, they appeared wet.

Then came other screams, the shrieks of women and the bawling of men.

A noted physician sprang suddenly out of the window. He fell down among the lemon trees.

Carem rose and went toward him.

"What, pray, goes on?"

"Your wife is delivered," said the physician. He had broken both his legs, but paid them no heed. His robe, like the window hangings, was soaked by blood.

"A boy or a girl?" asked Carem.

"Neither. I will tell you," said the physician, "since I cannot run away. Something tore itself from the womb of your wife, up out of her belly. It burst her like an orange. It was dark. It had a pointed snout.

Carem turned from the physician and gazed at the doorway of his house.

From the golden inner walk, something black was coming. It was

tall and lean and moved lightly on its hind limbs.

Nothing had he brought from the Tomb of the Black Dog, save his loot and his body, with every aperture blocked. But one. One too small indeed to fill. And the shadow had gone with him. The shadow had run out of him, there among the roses.

From Carem's doorway stepped Anubar, Biter of Souls. He was black as night, in the mid of day. His ears stood up, His snout was long. In His clawed paws lay the remains of Zulmia's womb and round His feet, like bracelets were wrapped the entrails of others. He ripped the physician's body in half, in passing. Then stared at Carem, who bowed low and waited for death.

As well he might.

## The End