Kadin and the Noble's Daughter

by Michael E. Shea

Kadin loved the desert. Many creatures lived in the desert. Some learned to survive within her harsh burning grip. Some even learned to thrive in her, building stone monuments to themselves and living their lives surrounded in the lavish luxuries of Gods. How puny their monuments were compared to the desert herself.

Where they had castles surrounded by dry moats, the desert had mountains surrounded by thousand year sandstorms. Where they had silks and the most beautiful slaves serving their every greatest desire, she had dunes that stretched for a thousand leagues and a sun that burned huge and deep crimson in the violet sky. Where desert kings, the Danken, dined on the finest food and drank the finest wine, the desert drank every drop of water from the air itself and feasted on men.

Kadin knew the desert. He knew her voice whispering in the dark of night like a dangerous lover. The sound he heard now was not her voice but a cry from one trapped within the desert's teeth. It was the cry of a woman.

Kadin rose from his makeshift bed in the dip of two dunes. He stood quickly, tying the leather straps of his knife belt around his waist. He pulled on his boots and silently mounted White Ash. THe mare felt his soft touch and made no sound.

Kadin listened and heard the cry again. He studied the dunes in the darkness of night. THe blood moon painted the desert a deep red. He felt the echos and turned White Ash towards their origin. He rode quietly into the night.

Kadin saw the glow of torchlight long before cresting the hill. He guessed four riders from the sound of their horses and confirmed it when he rose above them.

Three men, now on foot, chased a woman in black across the dune. Their horses stood back, panting from a hard ride. The woman's own stallion lay dead, a black arrow buried in its flank.

The smallest of the three men caught her first, grappling her legs. She went down into the sands. The other two, one tall and carrying a spear; the other huge and armored in dark steel, slowed their running to a walk.

"Don't break her before we've even started," yelled the big man. The woman cried as the smaller man turned her over.

Kadin dismounted and slid down the dune on the soft soles of his boots.

"Quite a run!" said the tallest man. As he got closer, Kadin saw the black plate and leather armor, the cut of the boot, and the shroud that protected their necks from both sun and blade. These were Dan Trex's men, soldiers from the slave army.

The smallest of the men ripped open the woman's black garb. Kadin saw her white skin in the flicker of the man's discarded torch burning near by. He would have to move fast if he wanted to learn anything before things got too far.

"Hello," said Kadin. All three men turned and looked at him. The woman kicked out but the small man grabbed her ankle and pinned it down without turning his eyes from Kadin. He was fast.

"Fly, desert rat. Or we will rape you too just for spite," said the big man. The man's tone put Kadin off. The big man should have taken more time before dismissing Kadin so quickly.

"Is she a ransom?" said Kadin.

"A lost flower in the desert, bandit. Now go," said the tall spear wielder.

Kadin thought of correcting the man's assumption but changed his mind. Something in the big man's parlay got under his skin. It was careless and there was no room for mistakes in the desert.

"Perhaps I will have a chat with her first," said Kadin.

"Perhaps I will stick this spear in your arse," said the tall man. He turned towards Kadin and lunged. Kadin turned and the spear buried itself in the sand. He drew Nightwhisper and cut easily through the hardwood shaft. Kadin grabbed the remaining severed shaft and pulled. The tall man fell forward. Kadin angled the point of his blacksteel knife and stabbed under the plate of the man's armor. The man screamed.

"Shit," said the big man in the black steel armor. He turned and drew a curved sword from his belt. He circled Kadin, his sword in one hand and a burning torch in the other. He threw the torch end over end at Kadin and rushed in as it flew. Kadin sidestepped the torch, spun his knife into a reverse grip, and turned into the swing of the man's sword. Kadin planted his foot and twisted as the big man plowed into him. Both men fell into a pile and Kadin heard the satisfying pop of the man's ankle. Kadin pinned the man's arm out with his boot and cut hard four times, once across the belly, once under the left arm, once under the seam of the breastplate, and once under the leather collar. Blood rushed from the wounds. The man gurgled, spat, cursed, and died.

Kadin stood. Blood ran down his chest. The third man narrowed is eyes. He drew a long dagger and prepared to stab the screaming woman. She twisted, giving Kadin enough time to throw. The blade spun and hit, but

not point first. The hilt of his knife caught the man in the jaw, sending him back. Kadin swept up the curved blade at his feet and rushed in. Before the small man could raise any defense, Kadin cut hard. His first cut was not mortal but his second one was. He picked up Nightwhisper as the man died and the desert drank his blood.

Kadin turned and saw the woman pulling her black clothes over her bare skin.

"Hello, desert flower," said Kadin.

Kadin burned the fire in a low valley. It would remain unseen this low on the horizon and echos would warn him well in advance of any intruders. The girl sat close to the warmth of the fire, her eyes moving from the fire to Kadin and back. Kadin handed her a ceramic cup of herb broth and boiled lean meat. She sipped it and chewed the meat.

"What is your name?" asked Kadin.

"Lenda," the girl whispered. Kadin offered her a skin of water he had taken from the Trex soldiers' horses.

"What brings you out of Gazu Tazar?"

"My father."

"You travel to him?"

"No"

"You flee from him? Why?"

"If I had stayed, my father would feed me to a devil."

She had been frightened when Dolan had come into their house screaming. Her father had cursed and rushed into the audience hall of their manor. Dolan continued screaming, his two slave diggers holding him up. Lenda heard the blood spattering on the stone floor. Grel and Alakar came in from the opposite hall with blades in their hands.

"The buggering stone coffin bit me!" screamed Dolan. "Chewed at my hand like a hyena." Dolan's feet went out from under him and he fell. Blood pooled under him. Lenda's father pulled back the wet cloth around Dolan's hand. Lenda caught a glimpse of ragged hanging flesh and white bone. Dolan screamed again.

"Where?" said her father.

"The dig under the temple of Dim. In the lower vaults. There was a red ruby as big as your fist in a hollow in the center of a sarcophagus. I wanted to get it, to bring it to you. But the stone bit me." Dolan went white and stopped talking.

Lenda could have stayed there but the sight of Dolan's bleeding frightened her. And talk of a red ruby? That she had to see.

Lenda's father had spent twenty years, Lenda's whole life, digging under the temples of Gazu Tazar. Though of noble's blood, her father's love of shining treasures and expensive women kept him continually seeking the lost treasures of the old empire.

The air got cold the moment Grel lowered Lenda into the shattered hole leading into the crypt. Lanterns

painted the stone in orange. Faces, eyeless and horrible, grinned from carvings along the walls. Figures, tall and lean, often stripped of skin, clutched naked girls.

In the center of the buried tomb lay a stone sarcophagus. A whole cut through its center. Blood spread all around the hole.

Lenda's father drew his finger across the top of the sarcophagus leaving a clean line through centuries of thick dust. He leaned forward and peered into the hollow. Red light gleamed in his eyes and he smiled.

"Dolan put his hand in and grabbed it?" he asked to the slaves. One slave nodded. "And blades severed his hand. A crude trap for such a place. He peered in again, using his torch to shine light into the hole. "There are grooves inside. They are channeling Dolan's blood."

The next moments flowed into Lenda's mind like a dream. She heard the deep thud and rasp of rusted metal. At first she thought one of the men had dropped something but they all leapt back as the sarcophagus lid split and fell open.

An ancient husk of a man lay inside, covered in dust. Dolan's blood covered his face and torso.

It's eyes opened.

Twin orbs of black focused on Lenda. She screamed. Grel lifted his greatsword and raised it over his head. Lenda heard a pop inside Grel's head and saw blood rush from his nose in a flood. The large man stumbled backward and fell. Lenda's father barked incomprehensible orders. Alakar drew his knife from his belt. One slave fainted and the other spoke rapidly in a tongue Lenda had never heard. Panic filled her.

Lenda ran.

A day and a night passed. Lenda floated through her home, eating food with no taste and drinking water as dry as sand. She did not sleep. Any time her eyes closed she saw orbs of shining black staring at her.

They came early in the morning while the sun hid under the earth and the blood moon rose high. Her father stepped in and Lenda let out a sigh of pure relief. She ran down the stairs but stopped when Grel stepped in behind him. His left eye was empty of any consciousness. His right was filled with blood. He carried his sword but his whole body moved stiff. His skin was white. Alakar came in next. He looked little different than normal. His blade was still in his hand.

The man from the crypt came in behind the other three. Everything about him had changed but his black eyes. His skin was pale but otherwise normal. HIs black hair hung down over a black cloak. He wore an expensive velvet tunic and high boots with black trousers.

"Come down, my dear." Her father's voice cut through her panic. Her father looked at her unblinking. "We have a guest."

Lenda's feet moved with a mind of their own. She felt as though her body belonged to someone else.

"Come meet our guest," said her father. Lenda's throat was dry. She poured a silver pitcher of water into a pewter glass. The black eyes of the stranger burrowed into her.

She approached. Her father and his men stepped aside. THe man stood tall, his face white against his dark hair and dark clothes. He reached towards her with long fingers and Lenda heard him speak in her mind. Unknown words and dark visions flowed past. She felt cold fingers touch her bare neck.

Lenda threw the glass of water.

The man screamed and Lenda nearly fell unconscious. She fled past and into the dawn. Her father's horse was tied outside. She mounted the horse and kicked it into a gallop towards the gates and the desert beyond.

"That is quite a story." Kadin chewed on another slice of horse meat. Lenda stared at him.

"You don't believe me?" she asked.

"No. But it is a good story. I heard stories of demon blooded vampires in the forgotten cities below the desert as a child. I hear women use such stories to woo their children to sleep."

"I speak the truth."

"Whether a demon of the five hells chases you or the city guard sent men to punish you for pig theft, you are in the desert now. It doesn't matter how you got here, what matters is what you will do next."

"I will go to my uncle in Gazu Bedel."

"Bedel is a week away on horseback. Do you know the path?"

Lenda looked at Kadin unblinking. Her eyes grew cold. "What shall I pay you?" she asked.

"Now that is a good question."

She rode well for a noble's daughter. They made good time as they rode through the day and into the dusk. They slept in mid-day when the huge red sun burned down mercilessly on the world.

At dusk they made camp, setting a low fire in a deep valley. Stone cliffs and plateaus towered over them like ancient sleeping titans.

Kadin had removed his leather vest and washed the dirt off his body with clean sand.

"You are a slave?"

Kadin turned to Lenda. He hadn't thought about the brand on his back in years.

"I was."

"That is the mark of Dan Vitar of the second slave pit of Gazu Kadem."

"It is."

"But you are not a slave now?"

"I am not."

"My father knew Dan Vitar." Kadin turned and looked hard at Lenda. Was she lying now? If so, he could not tell. "My father used to sell Dan Vitar's artifacts, the ones he found in the pit."

Kadin drew his knife, its black blade shone red in the setting sun. It warmed in his touch. Lenda looked frightened.

"This is one such artifact," said Kadin. "Some day I will have to show it to Dan Vitar myself."

They slept until just before dawn, ate a small meal, and rode again through the next day. They slept again at high sun, protected in a light cloth tent. Kadin watched Lenda sleep, his eyes moving over her soft skin. Any other man would have taken her by now. Kadin found little pleasure in taking a woman against her will. It was the burning of their own desire that aroused him. Their release of inhibitions and sudden drive of lust, that is what fueled Kadin's own desire. It was difficult to explain that to the pleasure slaves. Their only inhibition was the amount of coin one must spend for their virtues. Kadin sighed. She probably thought he liked men by now. He drew a finger lightly against her arm. Lenda stirred but did not wake.

They rode over the cracked plains into the evening before stopping.

"We're four days away now." Kadin said, chewing. "Why don't you entertain me with another monster story?"

The echo of tight catgut cut off any possible reply. Kadin dove as a steel tipped arrow barely missed the back of his skull.

"Get down!" he shouted, pulling his blade from his belt. He rolled behind his saddle as another arrow buried itself in the sand where he was but a moment before.

Kadin breathed slowly. He tried to relax his body as he listened.

"That's Alakar." said Lenda. Her voice lacked any emotion. She was in shock. "He's very good." Kadin looked at her. Her right shoulder was exposed to the archer's aim yet no arrow pierced it. The archer only aimed for him.

"When I was young, my friends and I would throw flowers into the air. Alakar could fire arrows through three of them before they hit the ground. He didn't smile or scold us. He used to tell us that his entire body and entire life existed to put his arrows into his targets.

"One time a knifeman tried to stab my father during a feast. Alakar put an arrow into each of his eyes before anyone else had seen the attack. Alakar's expression was exactly the same as it was when he shot my flowers."

Another arrow skipped off of the sand half a hand above Kadin's head. The arrows stopped. Kadin waited.

The sound of feet running across the sand sprung Kadin into action. A heavy bladed sword cut into the ground.

From the glow of the red moon Kadin saw a huge man swing the sword again. Kadin slid back. The man's eyes were both black. Purple veins stood out on the man's neck and halfway down his chest. Kadin spun under the blade's swing and kicked hard. He heard tendons pop in the man's knee but if the man felt it at all, he gave no sign.

Kadin rolled back and onto his feet. His long braided hair whipped back. The huge man stood still in front of him and smiled. White hot pain laced from Kadin's collar bone. His hand moved to the spot but it banged into the wooden shaft that now protruded from his shoulder. Kadin screamed and fell. He felt the big man close in as his upper left torso went numb. When he heard the big man raise the sword again, Kadin spun and cut. His black knife cut deep, down to the bone, in the man's thigh. Blood spattered across the sand. The big man grunted and fell to one side. Kadin cut again, deep against the man's throat. Dark blood pumped from the wound.

Kadin rolled, feeling the rush of pain when the steel tip of the arrow touched the ground. He lay still.

Foot steps, lighter and slower, came over the mound. In the corner of his eye, Kadin saw a smaller man with an arrow knocked on his long bow. Kadin watched as the man passed. His dry eyes burned. H waited until the man's back was to him.

"Time to come home, little flower." The man's voice was harmonic and calm.

Kadin tucked his legs and stood. Quick as he was, the man heard him and reacted. The man spun and drew his bow. Kadin swung and cut the catgut string. The bow sprung loud and the arrow fell. Kadin stabbed hard, burying his black knife to the hilt in the man's throat. The small man gurgled and fell. Even in death his face was calm.

They rode hard that night and into the late morning. Sweat poured over Kadin's face and down his braids to his back. Every step his horse took was a new lesson in pain. He passed out at least twice but Lenda's cry woke him before he fell from his mount. If he had fallen, he would have died.

At high sun, when the red orb burned hottest spotted the ragged peaks of their destination, Ava Tog Kar. The ruins looked the same as they had when he had stumbled on them three years earlier. As far as he knew, no one knew of the ruins but him.

Two of the four stone towers tapering from their wide bases to the sharp tips, had crumbled to dust. The northern wall, built of huge sandstone bricks, stood with the remaining two towers. Kadin and Lenda rode around the wall and through a path of sinister granite statues. Each was shaped either as a naked man or woman, half twisted and disfigured into the shape of a beast. On one podium, a statue of a man stood screaming at the sky, one arm of writhing snakes. One woman knelt on all fours, her face forward in ecstasy as a half man half bull mounted her from behind. Another figure, half man half beast with twisting horns and huge tusks, appeared to be eating a child. Kadin and Lenda said nothing as they passed.

Lenda gasped when she saw the well. It was forty feet across and deeper than their eyes could see. A rim of white marble surrounded it with a black raised platform to the north.

They dismounted. Kadin wanted to scream and his hand went to the wound on his shoulder. He could feel how warm his skin was underneath his sleeveless tunic. Kadin unwound a coil of rope and tied it to his water skin. he watched Lenda crawl to the edge of the pit and peer down. He threw his skin past her and she gasped again.

"It holds the greatest treasure one can find in the desert. And its fresh."

While his skin filled in the invisible depths below, Kadin took an iron cup from his saddle pack and placed it on the ground. He untied his trousers and smiled when Lenda blushed and turned away. He urinated into the cup and retied his pants. He handed the cup to Lenda who looked at the cup with disgust. Kadin cut his leather tunic away with his black bladed knife. Kadin laid back and looked at the yellow sky.

"Pour it on the wound." Lenda hesitated until he turned and repeated himself. She poured. He felt nothing at first and then a burning grew until he wanted to cry.

"Get the water," he said, grinding his teeth. An eternity passed before Lenda returned with his dripping waterskin. "Pour it on." Lenda did and the cool water flowed. Kadin let his breath out and fell into darkness.

Four days passed while Kadin and the noble's daughter sat surrounded by the fiendish statues of a forgotten age. Fever burned at Kadin and Lenda used water from the well to wash his brow and clean his wound. When the fever broke on the third day, Kadin was confident he would survive. He remembered hearing Lenda whisper to him as she poured the water on his wound and into his mouth, deep in the dark dreams of his fever.

"Oh sweet mother, wash us to the end of days." She had repeated it again and again.

"What was that you whispered to me?"

Lenda looked at Kadin a long while before answering.

"When my brothers and I feared the night my mother told us to repeat it. She said they were words of power that kept the demons and shadows at bay. She said her great grandmother passed it along as she had, words of the water priestesses of the old empire.

"I didn't remember it until I saw that creature who looked like royalty standing next to my father. When I felt his cold mind touching mine, I spoke my mother's words. They pushed his voice out of my head."

"What sort of devil was he, Kadin?"

Kadin looked up to the red moon above. All around them, the statues of twisted horror seemed to move in the shadows.

"The high kings of the city states outlawed all gods, above or below, but many still call to them. They practice ritual and worship and prayer in secret. Some even practice the dark arts of the old ones. Madmen say they open pits and pull forth screaming creatures of the black hells. They drink their black blood and gain power over the mind. It lets them touch the minds of others and slow or speed up their own passage through time. They feed on the warm blood of mortals. Some call them demonbloods or vampires but no label can describe them correctly. Perhaps this fiend of yours was a vampire long forgotten."

"Or maybe I've gone mad," said Lenda.

"Maybe." Kadin smiled at Lenda. She smiled and looked at him for a long time. She slipped her feet under herself and slid close. Kadin sat still and continued his smile. She kissed him, her tongue sliding along his lips. His hand circled her waist and pressed her close. His other hand cupped and lifted her breast. She moaned and pressed closer.

They made love under the red moon. She sat atop him, head back and crying within waves of pleasure. He smiled at her as she lay atop him. She smiled back.

"Again, desert rat."

Kadin survived his twenty eight years by hearing and seeing everything. He saw birds in flight from miles away and tracked starving rogues across the desert in sandstorms. Yet he heard and saw nothing when the vampire entered the ruins and stepped into their camp.

The red moon lay low, half hidden past the dunes. The darkness of the sky faded into deep violet.

The vampire stood on a stone block twenty feet from where Kadin and Lenda lay naked. Kadin opened his eyes and stared, knowing the creature saw him awake but unable to react.

The being stood tall, wrapped in black cloth. His black eyes pierced into Kadin's own. A scarf of black covered the vampire's mouth and fluttered behind him in the chilled morning winds. He stood on the black stone above the well.

Kadin could almost see the world twisting around the vampire. He was a force of power in a dead world. He was alien, a creature of dread might and unfathomable cruelty.

Kadin stood slowly and picked up his black knife. He tightened his muscles and relaxed, knees bent and resting on the balls of his feet. He felt the heft of his knife in his hand. Though naked, he felt far from vulnerable.

Then the vampire's mind crashed in on him. It felt heavy, pulling him down and inward. He felt black fingers closing in. He heard the vampire's voice, deep, soothing, and horrible, speaking in a language of dark and terrifying words.

"Oh sweet mother, wash us till the end of days."

Kadin whispered the words again and again. He forced the black tendrils out of his mind and focused on visualizing a single movement. He pushed this vision back from his consciousness, into the instinct of wild animals chased by predators.

"Come." The vampire's black voice spoke huge in his mind. Kadin stepped towards him on legs that were not his own. His knife was slack in his hand. The black tentacles drove deeper. Kadin saw visions of dark sacrifice and dreadful ritual. He saw the vampire, once a man, laying upon the very stone alter upon which he now stood. His chest was ripped opened and a nightmarish horror vomited black blood onto his beating heart.

Around him, the statues came alive, twisting and screaming in pleasure and pain.

"Oh sweet mother, wash us till the end of days."

He whispered but the vampire was strong. Each push and Kadin's mind fell more and more into madness.

Kadin stepped in front of the vampire and looked into the infinite black eyes under the cowls of cloth whipping and twisting in the air like serpents. The vampire reached out to him with long sharp-nailed fingers covered in red blood.

Kadin's mind fell but the animal in him triggered. The vision he pushed deep down became reality.

Kadin swept his black blade across, through the black cloth, and split open the white skin underneath. Black blood flowed down the vampire's throat and chest. His black eyes went wide. The vampire ripped aside his cowl and tried to scream but only blood came from his mouth. Kadin felt the weight on his mind free.

Kadin kicked hard into the vampire's chest. The vampire fell backwards and into the open mouth of the well. Tendrils of his black cloak and scarf writhed around him as he fell into the blackness.

Kadin stood on the well's lip, naked and holding his knife in a black blood soaked hand.

Lenda awoke and stood, holding a wool blanket in front of her ivory breasts.

"I had a bad dream."

They left the accursed well at dawn and rode two more days before crossing between the two huge bulls of stone and gold that guarded the gates of Gazu Bedel. The domes of the city's ancient temples towered over the sandstone and clay buildings. All around them merchants and slaves rushed during the afternoon's business. The priests of the god kings, dressed in blue cowls, strode past them. Pleasure slaves cooed and let their sheer clothing slip as crowds rode past.

Lenda slipped off his horse like a swath of silk. He turned and looked at her. Her eyes swam and she smiled at him. He felt her smile all over. Without a word she slipped into the crowd and disappeared.

An hour later Kadin dismounted in front of a cheap but modestly safe house of rest. He found it when he reached back into his saddle pack. He took it out and watched the sunlight reflect in the shining gem. As the red light shined in his eyes, Kadin reconsidered his accommodations.

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