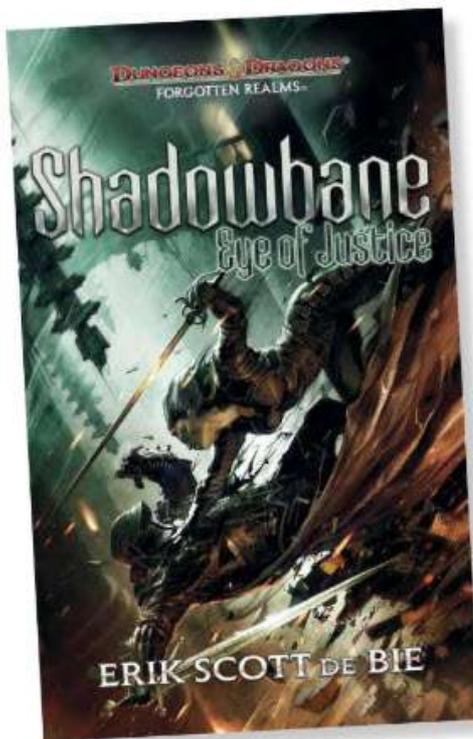


Heir of Shadowbane

By Erik Scott de Bie



29 Nightal, the Year of the Fifth Circle (1476 DR)
Westgate

Snow swirled outside the windows of the Rotten Root tavern. Inside, pipe smoke and laughter filled the stuffy common room, partially obscuring the otherwise unadorned charms of the dancer trying to get Kalen Dren's attention.

The Mask Dance was one of the more alluring imports to Westgate in recent years: a risqué act in which the performer wore a fanciful mask and nothing else. Apparently, it had hit Cormyr like a marauding horde earlier that year, and dancers in Suzal worked all through the nights and most of the days. The dance had proved almost as popular in Westgate, and drew in a goodly amount of coin for the Root. Merchants and peasants alike sought out the establishment, whose limber dancers (male and female both, all oiled to perfection) rarely failed to impress and titillate.

In this particular dance, neither the dancer's phoenix mask nor her bare figure could distract her young patron, and both of them knew it. Kalen appreciated, however, how hard she tried to win his favor and coin. It made her all the more appealing to use as a cover.

"My gratitude," Kalen said when she was done. He slid two gold coins across the table toward her. "Another?"

"Of course, saer." She began another dance, one that involved stretching her legs over her head and

wriggling her toes a hand's breadth from his face. "Does this please you?"

"Well enough."

His chin propped on his hand, Kalen made a show of scrutinizing the woman who writhed on the table, while in truth he took in the rest of the common room. He watched, he listened, and he paid heed to his instincts. He noted which thieves gathered to discuss the night's take or a forthcoming job, which traders swindled which merchants and vice versa. He attuned his senses to the ragged heartbeat of Westgate's criminal underworld, feeling for its secrets and deceptions. His mentor, Levia, called it "insightful watching," a technique she had learned from her own teacher long ago.

Kalen, on the other hand, called it boring. He wanted to be out in the night, running from rooftop to rooftop, fighting villains and smiting shadows. But his mentor insisted he maintain his skill in that most basic skulduggery technique: observation. And so listen and watch he did. He would be vigilant like Helm, God of Guardians. He would be wise like Gedrin Shadowbane, first of the Eye of Justice.

A trio of Fire Knives he'd been shadowing for several tendays spoke in disgust of opposition from Nine Golden Swords rebels. A war was brewing between the two gangs, one in which the Eye of Justice had stayed frustratingly neutral. By all accounts, as recently as seven years ago, before he had come to Westgate, the Eye would have been heavily involved, taking down both gangs to preserve the peace. That

the Fire Knives had risen to power at all was a travesty, and recently the Eye had even started taking bribes and favors from the villains. Gedrin Shadowbane would be grieved at what had become of his vision.

It disgusted Kalen that the Eye would consort with thieves and thugs, but things were getting better. Kalen had made a considerable impact on the organization seven years ago by returning with Gedrin's famous sword, Vindicator, which marked him as Gedrin's anointed heir and the chosen servant of the Threefold God. In doing so, he'd levied considerable pressure on the leadership of the Eye to clean up the organization. Ever since, Lord Seer Uthias Darkwell had seen fit to distance the Eye from the gangs' petty squabbles.

Considering he'd overseen the Eye's descent into thievery in the first place, the Lord Seer had proved surprisingly amenable to purifying the guild's behavior. Though Levia was optimistic that Darkwell had changed and that the rest of the Eye would surely follow, Kalen had not grown up trusting to hope. The thief in him warned him to be dubious, and so he was. If Darkwell had truly returned to Lord Gedrin's path, why had he not turned the strength of the Eye to doing some good in Westgate, rather than feasting on the city's dead like a scavenger? The street soldiers of the organization still took bribes, roughed up citizens, and generally indulged in the tactics of bullies. Nothing ever seemed to change.

Whenever Kalen brought up his doubts, Levia urged him to declare himself the rightful leader of the Eye and sweep away the old powers. This he knew he could not do. Kalen hadn't acquired the political clout to do so. And did he really want to lead the Eye? After seven years of training—years spent yearning for an end to the guild's corruption—Kalen had grown weary. There had to be a better way.

He wished his mentor would hurry up and get to the Rotten Root before his anger took him over.

"Saer." The phoenix-masked dancer appeared at his side, a robe belted over her sweaty skin. Her dance must have ended during his reverie. He had not even noticed. "My shift is done. Perhaps you might accompany me . . . elsewhere?"

"Do you need an escort home, good lady?" he asked. "The streets are perilous."

The dancer bit her lip. "I worry about the cold, actually. I need warmth." She ran her hand over his left shoulder, which he barely felt through his curse. He'd been a prisoner in his own body for years now, indifferent to all but the extremes of pain or pleasure.

"Then I hope you've a coat," he said. "You might have some of that stew on the fire before you leave. It's very warm."

Her face registered a flicker of frustration. "Will you accompany me or not?"

"Oh, sorry," Kalen said. "I am, alas, meeting someone."

"A woman, perchance?"

"Indeed." His mentor Levia was, after all, a woman. "Why?"

"No reason. At all." The dancer turned away, looking disgusted, and walked away.

Kalen wondered what had made her so upset.

"You can really be daft when it comes to women, no?" piped up a tiny voice. The halfling Cellica—his sister by bond if not by blood—hopped up onto the bench next to him. "That one practically threw herself at you, and you didn't even notice."

"She did?" Kalen shook his head. "I've a good deal on my mind."

"Too much to notice twin blessings like *that*?" Cellica cupped her hands over her chest. "That one must be touched by Sharess, and she wanted you to touch her. Idiot."

"Perhaps you should go after her, then," Kalen said. "Or is she too tall for your taste?"

Cellica blushed a little. "I prefer my lasses somewhat more robust, in truth."

"I'm sure."

Cellica joined him for a drink—or, rather, she drank both of their ales, since he rarely indulged. Kalen found it soothing to listen to her chatter on about the daily fashions in Westgate: which noble patronized such-and-such salon, what scandal had become the talk of the town, and which dresses Silks of Dawn had created that absolutely *everyone* had to have for the spring.

Many of the rumors in Westgate circled around the scandalous courtship of Muorn Cormaeril and Rigante Bleth, the First Lord's daughter and heir apparent to the Fire Knives, and through them Westgate. Both families had been exiled from Cormyr as traitors in years past, but Cormaeril had regained at least part of its standing while Bleth remained a bitter enemy of the Dragon Kingdom. That one of Cormaeril's sons might wed the daughter of the Fire Knives shocked the nobility, but so far Rigante had shown little interest in the assassins' guild. Instead, she rode with the Draeven marauders of Proskur sworn to repel Cormyr from the city and thwart the Dragon Kingdom's supposed imperialist aims. Rumors circulated, however, and Cellica reveled in the gossip.

"They call her the Fire Princess, for her hair and her temper," the halfling said dreamily. "Strong, beautiful, rich, wields a blade as well as any sellsword and better than most . . . Now *that* would be a woman not to turn down."

"I really don't think—" Kalen stopped, caught in mid-sentence by a familiar scent: oiled leather with a faint touch of juniper.

Levia Shadewalker had arrived.

Kalen knew immediately something was the matter, because of the direct path his mentor took to him. Cursed with a forgettable face despite the halfling heritage that should have made her lovely, Levia took full advantage of her unassuming presence when skulking, but tonight she drew every eye in the Rotten Root. Part of it was the symbol of the Eye of Justice

she wore openly on her breastplate, suggesting she came on official guild business. Kalen himself never wore the symbol, as eyes tended to widen and mouths to seal when he displayed it, which was precisely Levia's intention now. Moreover, Levia's fixity of purpose made the moment deadly serious, drowning out all thoughts of the masked dancer.

He rose to meet her. "What is it?"

"Outside." She turned on her heel and strode back into the snowy Westgate night.

Kalen rose immediately and followed her, heedless of Cellica's incredulous protest.

"Yondalla spare us all from crusaders." She tossed a few coins on the table and hurried behind him.

"And Waukeen bless those who pay the bill."



When Cellica left the Rotten Root, the street seemed deserted. A storm brewed, causing swirling snowfall to choke Westgate's labyrinthine streets. Few risked the battered cobblestone thoroughfares of the city of thieves in inclement weather or after dark, and this was both. Kalen stood like a gray statue against the storm. Cellica saw no sign of Levia.

"Well," said Cellica. "Guess we'd better turn back to where it's warm, the drinks are plentiful, and the dancers welcoming..."

"There," Kalen pointed to the roof.

"Truly?" Cellica said, hesitating. "Climbing hardly seems wise."

He put out his arm.

"Oh, Hells, no," she said. "No. Not going to happen. Not in the slightest."

"Cele."

She sighed and climbed into his grasp. "Very well, just—aah!"

As she clung desperately, Kalen summoned the magic in his boots and leaped. Tiny blue flames lit under his feet, and the magic lifted him up to the roof as easily as if he'd taken a tiny step. Cellica cursed

Levia every day for having given him those boots, and she prayed every day that he would outgrow the frightful and (worse) unfashionable things. No such luck—they seemed to grow with him, fitting better each day. Gods-damned magic.

Cellica shivered as Kalen deposited her onto the snowy rooftop, both because the wind was fiercer with no buildings for shelter and because of the harrowing experience. "Gods-damned magic."

Kalen ignored her. His attention hung on Levia, who kneeled at the edge of the tavern roof like a gargoyle against the storm. Not that Cellica would ever make the comparison aloud: there were certain things one did not say to a friend. She liked Levia, despite her militant focus on dispensing justice and devout lack of humor. The half-Elf reminded Cellica of Kalen in many ways, though Cellica hoped her brother would continue to make more upbeat friends to lighten his mood. The world always felt so bleak around those two.

"What's so secret and important?" Kalen asked.

Levia's face looked like a bleached skull. "Slaves," she said. "We've received word that the Fire Knives are buying a shipment of Durpari from Var the Drowned. The men they'll put to work in some major excavation project outside the city. The women... well, it'll be worse."

"On a ship, then." Kalen nodded. "Who's overseeing the trade?"

"My informant says Zerix the Cleaver."

Cellica shuddered at the name. A thoroughly unsavory brute in Westgate's underworld, Zerix bore a well-earned reputation for cruelty and violence, even among the Fire Knives. To the former butcher, every enemy was an opportunity to perfect his cuts. Apparently, he never cleaned his notched kukri fully, preferring to let the blood of each victim stain its blade.

"What's more," Levia said. "I'm sure a few that catch Zerix's eye will end up in his bed—or on the slab."

"That's quite enough detail," Cellica said. "We're convinced."

Kalen nodded. "The ship arrives tonight?"

"The Bleached Bone weighed anchor just outside the harbor an hour ago. She'll put into the Vhammos private docks around deepnight per their agreement with the House of Bleth."

"Bleth must be paying them a kingly sum," Cellica mused. "Wasn't Trebor Vhammos engaged to Rigante Bleth? And then she jilted him at the altar for her paladin of Proskur? This must be a move to repay that slight." She nudged Kalen. "See? I told you gossip was valuable."

Levia nodded. "If we can thwart this deal, Bleth's alliance with Vhammos suffers and might collapse entirely." She handed Kalen a tabard with the eye-in-gauntlet symbol of the Eye emblazoned on it prominently. "Wearing Eye of Justice colors means we can claim to be enforcing Westgate's law against slavery, and no one will be able to object without looking complicit."

"Spare me the politics," Kalen shrugged into the tabard. "We don't stand for slavers or murderers. You need say nothing more." He put his hand on Levia's arm. "I am with you."

His teacher smiled broadly, and her whole body relaxed a little.

"Hrm." Cellica wondered if her clueless brother knew the effect he had on Levia. Alas. She fingered her crossbow-shaped amulet. "Can we go? It's gods-damned freezing up here."

Levia nodded. "Let's move."



Westgate's rooftops were too slick in the midst of the snowstorm for quick passage, so they descended to the cobblestones and raced through the drifts as

thunder rolled off the Sea of Fallen Stars. The old-blood families of Westgate called the storms the result of thrashing nightmares dreamed by the old Stormlord Talos, though priests of Gruumsh, God of Destruction, insisted their god had slain Talos and claimed his mantle. True or not, most folk cared little who heard their prayers, so long as their prayers were answered.

In Kalen's experience, death rarely proved much of a hindrance to the gods in Faerûn: the sword of a dead god sheathed at his belt gave enough evidence of that. As he gripped the handle of Vindicator, gray flames licked his gloved hand and he once again sensed the favor of the long-dead God of Guardians. Helm had first conveyed his will nearly a hundred years ago to Gedrin Thalavar, Levia's master and Kalen's inspiration. Gedrin had taken the name "Shadowbane" for this duty, and he had brought justice to the darkest corners of the world.

Kalen knew Levia expected great things of him. To her, he was Gedrin's heir, chosen by fate to wield Vindicator. And indeed, he—and no one else—could wield the sword. He was not sure whether Helm or Gedrin had done the choosing, but if Kalen could honor even a tenth of their legacy, he would consider his duty done.

They delved into the east end of Westgate as the clouds broke and the moon rose high. Around them, frost-stiffened banners painted with elegant calligraphy marked the territory of the growing Shou community. The Nine Golden Swords claimed the area around the east end, and Kalen wondered why the Fire Knives would choose to do business outside their own territory. Perhaps they meant to implicate the Swords in the slave trade, thus legitimizing a crackdown on the Shou.

Sure enough, a ship was putting in at the Vhammos dock and the watch was notably absent. This neither surprised nor troubled Kalen: since House Bleth owned the watch, they would only be more

swords to defeat. Their absence meant Kalen would have less blood on his hands come morn. His hands were stained enough from all the blood he had spilled before Gedrin had saved him all those years ago in Luskan. The boy he had been still unnerved the man he had become, and every life he ended thereafter reminded him of his vicious youth.

"We should scout out the docks," Levia said. "I have no idea how many men Zerix has, or how many pirates might be on the Bone."

"Very well," Kalen's stomach roiled with impatience. Why was he so edgy? Instinct told him to strike fast and hard. They needed to go immediately. "Cellica, you keep watch from up there." He nodded up to the top of the warehouse and put out his arm to fly her up.

"Oh no, none of that," the halfling said. "I'll climb." Kalen nodded. "Levia, you take the right, I'll take the left. Note blades, obstacles, exits. Find a position of strength, I'll make the first move."

Levia nodded in agreement. Though she was Kalen's teacher, she usually let him give the orders. It was as much a test of his abilities as her own preference. Levia was not a leader but a fiercely loyal right hand. So she had been to Gedrin, and so she had chosen to be for Kalen.

They broke ranks and headed into the building. Once he was alone, Kalen fell into the comfortable slinking step he'd favored in Luskan to case the warehouse. His days as a thief might be long behind him, but the skills had not gone away. He knew how to size up a mark, be it a building or a victim, and he had a knack for finding a subtle entrance or a quick exit. His shady background had served him well under Levia's tutelage, though she'd taught him not to kill needlessly. That had been a difficult lesson.

He eschewed the obvious side door, at which two Vhammos guard stood watch, and instead made his way down toward the dock. The place swarmed with Vhammos sentries, though Kalen couldn't make out

any Fire Knives. It struck him as odd that Vhammos would do all the work, but then, the Knives would hardly want to risk being seen before the exchange was made. He waited.

After a moment, Kalen heard a deep voice call out, "Aid, you oafs!"

The men departed, hurrying to help unload the "cargo." From his vantage point, Kalen could see the *Bleached Bone* with its peeling white hull and gray sails. It was a pirate schooner, no mistake. He watched as men in the livery of Vhammos soldiers escorted half a dozen cloaked and huddled figures onto the dock. The boards creaked under their feet, and Kalen could hear one among them weeping quietly. The popping of his knuckles told him he'd been clutching his fists too tightly, though he hadn't realized it because of his curse.

Kalen climbed along under the warehouse until he found floorboards rotted away by the constant waves, then shimmed his way up. Dust coated his face and cloak, but getting dirty was of no consequence compared to saving a dozen folk from slavery. On the edges of the main hall, he scuttled, like the Dead Rats he had run with in Luskan, to a hiding spot behind a shipping container that stank of moldering cloth and the salt of the sea.

A group of men stood in the hall, ostensibly inspecting the new arrivals, who cowered in a knot under their lewd scrutiny. So few had come off the boat it forced Kalen to wonder how many had perished in the journey from Durpar. Did the sailors simply throw the bodies overboard, heaping yet another insult on the men and women they'd stolen from their lives and families? Kalen hungered to crush House Vhammos and the Fire Knives, both at once if possible. He grasped Vindicator's handle, and gray flames surged around his hand.

What was taking Levia so long to get into position? He needed to move—to end this injustice before it went further.

Zerix appeared, distinctive among his fellows for the network of scars he bore on his bare chest and shoulders. Kalen had given him one of those scars personally, during one particularly dark night on the Spur. No doubt Zerix would remember him. The ugly man swaggered up to the first slave and sent him reeling to the ground with a backhand. He stepped over the man and seized a second slave—this one a woman—by the throat. He inspected her face as she struggled to free herself.

He could not wait any longer.

He heard a single tap from far above. It was not loud enough to distract the pirates, but he'd known to listen for it, seeing as he'd been listening for it. Cellica peered in the window, her eyes locked on him—and on Vindicator's flames. Of course she knew what he was thinking, and she shook her head violently to dissuade him. Too late.

Kalen slipped the sheathed Vindicator from his belt and held it before him like a staff as he strode from his hiding place. "Blades down and halt, in the name of the Eye of Justice," he intoned.

The nearest man—a Fire Knives assassin judging by his sneer and carriage—drew a blade, but Kalen brought his sheathed sword down hard across his hand, then up to slam into his jaw. The man collapsed without a sound.

Gray flames leaking from Vindicator's hilt, Kalen took in the rest of the assembled criminals, whose faces said they recognized him immediately. "Surrender now," he said.

The Vhammos dockworkers looked close to panic, and the Fire Knives themselves looked anxious. The power of Vindicator was well known in Westgate, and Kalen had won a reputation among those who dwelled in the shady underbelly of the city. Something was not right, though. Perhaps it was the swagger in Zerix's step that said he was not the least bit intimidated, or the way he smiled, drawing his split lips back over yellow teeth.

"He's the one," he said. "Take him now."

Blades scraped free of scabbards. Half a dozen men he had not seen at first leaned out from behind crates or barrels, crossbows cocked and ready in their hands. One of the men drew a wand from under his cloak and incanted the beginnings of a spell. Worst of all, the seemingly helpless "slaves" threw off their tattered cloaks to reveal maces and swords as well as well-oiled brigandine armor. It was, he realized, the standard equipment for knights of the Eye of Justice. Betrayed.

Kalen shut his eyes and ripped Vindicator from its scabbard with a flare of light that made his world go red for a heartbeat. At the same time, he leaned into a blind charge toward Zerix, sword in one hand and empty scabbard in the other. Startled cries told him he'd caught most of his dazzled attackers by surprise, and crossbow quarrels hissed aimlessly past him. He felt a dull impact as one lucky shot caught him in his sword arm, but his spellscar kept the pain silent. Fire burst just behind him. At least he'd blinded the wizard, thank Helm!

He opened his eyes just in time to see Zerix charging to meet him, blades ready. The old butcher hadn't been fooled and must have averted his eyes to avoid the flash. They met with a clash of steel.

"End of the path, crusader," Zerix said, his breath rank with his rotting teeth.

Zerix leaned his superior weight against Kalen to throw him back. Most of the thugs of Luskan would have taken that as a challenge, but Kalen had been a spindly child, always smaller than his opponents. He'd put on considerable muscle in the years since, but he still knew better than to grapple stronger men. He fell back and let Zerix overbalance, then brought Vindicator scything around to hack at his shoulder. It should have been a clean blow, but the quarrel in Kalen's sword arm strained against his body and weakened his slash.

Zerix chortled and knocked the attack aside with his cleavers. He twisted Vindicator into the floor and countered with a vicious backhand with his other blade. Kalen ducked and slammed his empty scabbard into the side of the man's knee, which made a cracking noise and wrenched a howl of pain and anger from Zerix. With surprising speed and strength, the butcher slammed his scarred head into Kalen's chest, which sent him staggering back. Dizzily, Kalen saw other swords angling toward him and swept Vindicator around to knock them aside.

"Levia," he said. "Now would be a fine moment."

The ground shook, and several of his attackers fell to one knee or hit the floor entirely. Levia appeared, a warrior's prayer to the Threefold God on her lips. Crossbow quarrels stabbed toward her, but they glanced off her shield and the golden aura of her faith. She raised her glowing mace high and brought it down on an enemy's hastily raised defense. His sword and arm both shattered under the divine-infused blow, and the man dropped senseless to the floor.

"Halt and down steel in the name of the Threefold God!" Levia cried.

Her appearance and challenge had an immediate effect. The few Vhammos dockhands who had remained, clubs or daggers at the ready, turned and fled through the doors and even the windows of the dock house. The Fire Knives backed away, wary of her power, but one of the fake slaves ran to engage her. His mace smashed into Levia's shield, knocking her off balance. She ceased being a god's vengeful servant and became a mortal woman, powerful but fallible.

Four fake slaves surrounded Kalen, glaring at him with silent, deadly determination. As they slowly closed the circle, they held their swords aloft, ready for his movement. They did not look the least bit afraid of him, which was bad. One twisted his scabbard out of his hand, and he had to let it go or be run through. He fell back and two enemies struck at once.

from opposite directions. Even their tactics had been designed to defeat his style.

A crossbow quarrel took one of Kalen's attackers in the shoulder. The impostor slave faltered and missed his strike.

Kalen seized the opportunity. He focused on the opposite attacker, parried, and followed the momentum of the attack to crash into the injured man. Taken by surprise, the man went down beneath the rush, and Kalen leaped off him to catch a low-hanging rafter. One-handed, he swung up and perched on the crossbeam. Below him, Zerix cursed his injured leg. Kalen leaped off, bringing his second hand up to clasp Vindicator's pommel. Holding his sword in both hands, Kalen plunged down at Zerix, who could not hope to block in his surprise.

Then Kalen's flight was interrupted when a glowing red hand the size of a horse wrapped around him, reversed his momentum, and slammed him back into the rafter, and then into the floor. The wizard, his greasy mustache groomed in the Inner Sea style, grinned at Kalen and raised his clenched fist. The hand rose in accordance, bearing Kalen aloft, and began to squeeze.

"Helm burn all wizards," Kalen said through clenched teeth. He couldn't feel the pain of the grasping hand, but it cut off his air and held his limbs immobile. The spell didn't seem powerful enough to kill, but it would not have to. Zerix stalked toward him, blades ready.

A crossbow quarrel hissed down from the ceiling and took the wizard between the neck and shoulder. The force knocked him gagging to the ground, and his arm flailed toward the ceiling. As it went, so did the conjured hand with its prisoner, smashing Zerix aside like an insect, then shooting up toward the skylight, where Kalen saw Cellica loading another quarrel into her crossbow. The halfling's eyes widened and she mouthed a curse as Kalen flew at her.

Metal groaned and glass shattered as the hand burst upward into the night. Cellica had started to leap away, but the force launched her up in a crazy spin. The hand flailed back and forth, jerked straight, then faded out of existence, leaving Kalen and Cellica hanging for a weightless heartbeat among a tempest of broken glass. Then they plummeted back into the dock house. The halfling cried out in surprise and fear.

Kalen released Vindicator to tumble freely, twisted in the air, and pulled Cellica into his embrace. Glass cut his cloak and limbs, but it would not hurt her. He swore it.

They slammed down with splintering force into a rafter, which caved in and sent a clenching shudder through Kalen's spine. He braced himself tight around Cellica, protecting her with his numb body. He watched as Vindicator spun end over end and stuck into the floor, cutting into the greasy floorboards like an arrow.

The rafter gave way with a ragged groan, and Kalen fell the last ten feet to the floor. Cellica rolled away. Kalen lay choking on dust, the splintered off remains of the rafter pinning his leg to the floor.

Kalen blinked and wiped grime from his face. At least he could still move his body. "Cellica?" he asked. "Cele?"

"Present," the halfling said, followed by a cough. She lay on the floor, dazed but otherwise unharmed. "One thing you are, Kalen—you're never boring."

"Another thing he is," said Zerix, "is dead."

The big butcher stood over them, heaving and red in the face. He hardly looked human in the moonlight streaming down from above. He'd taken a hit from the conjured hand to one cheek, leaving an ugly bruise, and the falling glass had torn him open half a dozen times from face to belly. His cleavers glinted hungrily.

"Put them down," Cellica said.

Kalen heard the compulsion in her voice. Since he had met Cellica stumbling out of a cultist's crypt, he'd known about her special magic. When she spoke, folk tended to listen, and when she mustered her focus, they often did as she said.

In the distraction, Kalen shoved the broken rafter off his twisted leg. He couldn't feel it beyond a distant gnawing.

"Don't scare me . . . little tramp," Zerix stepped toward them. "Cut you up . . . I will . . ."

"Wouldn't that be better?" Cellica gestured to Vindicator. "Pick it up."

Kalen bit his tongue and watched gray flame lick up Vindicator's blade. Zerix eyed it too, and Kalen could see the mad hunger in his eyes.

"Sorry," Cellica said.

"Why?" The butcher reached out his blood-slick hand for Vindicator.

As his fingers touched the hilt, torrents of gray flame sprang into life around the sword. Zerix stared at the sword, horrified, as his skin sizzled and seared to the steel, and gray flames spread across his hand. His mouth worked, mouthing partial words of shock.

"That's why," Cellica said.

Finally, Zerix managed to give voice to his pain, which ripped out of him as a roar of agony. He pulled at his stuck hand, and it took three tries before he ripped it away from Vindicator's hilt. Blood and seared flesh trailed in his wake as he ran screaming from the dock house. Their leader defeated, the rest of the Fire Knives retreated as well, no doubt thankful not to have to face Levia and her divine powers.

In the moment of peace, Kalen climbed to his feet despite his protesting leg. He'd likely sprained or broken it, but he felt no pain. "Harsh, Cele," he said. "You . . ."

Cellica's eyes widened and she gasped.

Something struck Kalen, and he looked down in time to see a blade sticking out of his belly. One of the Justice Knights disguised as slaves had stabbed him

from behind. "Traitors," the knight hissed in Kalen's ear.

"Kalen!" Levia fended off two more of the false slaves. One of them slashed the mace from her hand, but she managed to bash that attacker away with her shield.

Cellica drew a bead with her crossbow, but she couldn't discharge her quarrel without the risk of hitting Kalen.

Kalen twisted—hardly aware of the blade through his body—and slammed his fist into his attacker's face. The knight staggered back, pulling his sword free, but he stayed on his guard. Cellica fired her crossbow, but the man dodged and came in with a low attack. Kalen raised his bare hand, determined to block a killing thrust, even at the cost of his limb.

Then Levia was there, a flaming sword in her hands: Vindicator. Gray flames swept through the air and cut the knight's sword in half. The man fell back, his eyes wide and terrified, and Levia stood between him and Kalen. "Stay back," she said, "or I'll kill all of you."

The knights fell back, obvious terror on their faces. Kalen stared at Vindicator, and how Levia held it without burning her hands. He had thought he was the only one who could touch it, but perhaps Helm had chosen more than one champion?

"Levia," Kalen said.

She looked at him over her shoulder, then seemed to realize what was happening and winced as though in pain. She handed him back Vindicator, looking pleased to be parted from it. At the same time, healing magic passed between them as her hand touched his, closing the wound he could barely feel. Together, they faced the three remaining knights.

They looked none too confident. The knight who had attacked Kalen shoved the others forward and ran.

"Stop!" Cellica commanded, and the man jerked to a halt.

The others looked at each other, then turned toward Cellica with cries of challenge.

Levia blasted one with a jet of white light, and the knight shrieked and fell to her knees, coughing radiance. She screamed and plucked at her eyes, which had turned white and scabbed when the light had struck her face.

The other man rushed Kalen, his sword chopping down, but Kalen easily parried his blow. Rage grinding his teeth, he reversed Vindicator and smashed the man in the side of the head with the pommel. The false slave's helmet caved in, and he fell jerking to the ground.

"Kalen!" Levia cried, shock on her face. "There was no need to kill him."

"Couldn't be helped," he lied.

Levia shook her head, then dealt the blinded woman a blow to the back of the head that put her down, unconscious.

Kalen crossed to the paralyzed man, in his brigandine armor and leather mask, and shoved him to his knees. "This one can speak."

Cellica and Levia strode forward, and Kalen wrenched off the man's mask. Cellica gasped and Levia went pale. They both recognized Trawn, a Knight of the Eye in service to Lord Sephalus of the Vigilant Seers. The man hardly kept good care of his soldiers, though, so Trawn was as likely to act on his own initiative as upon his superior's orders. If he had come with other members of the order, though . . .

Cellica hurried to unmask the other fallen slaves. The one Kalen had killed with the pommel of Vindicator was a cutter named Dalor, a sharp blade out of the north. Levia's own victim was Alys, a con artist converted to the Eye, who lay unconscious and moaning in the wake of the light that had scared her eyes.

"Tell us who set this trap," Kalen demanded of Trawn. "Who gave the order?"

The would-be assassin spat at him.

Kalen wiped spittle from his face, then dealt the man a right cross to the cheek. "Who is the traitor? Who ordered this? Was it Haran? Rsalya? Which of our enemies sent you?"

Head lolling, the Justice Knight coughed and spat blood. "Whelp," he said. "I may have failed, but others will come. We will hound you from this city. We will never stop until—"

Cellica leaped atop him and drove one foot into his groin even as she grasped his face. She drove her thumbs into his eyes, and the man answered with a gargling scream.

"That's enough, Cele." Kalen pulled her off their hysterical captive.

"He said he would never stop," Cellica said. "Of course we have to kill him."

Levia's face was gray as ash, but she nodded in agreement.

Everything that Kalen had been before Westgate sided with his adopted sister, but he made a conscious effort to restrain his rage. "No. He is a zealot, yes, but he's more useful alive. We must find which of the Watchers wants us dead, or—gods forbid—which of the Vigilant Seers. We can go to Uthias, who will root out the traitor. The Eye must not fall into schism."

Their captive uttered a guttural, broken sound Kalen could not at first identify. When they all fell silent, he could hear it better. Laughter.

"Foolish boy," Trawn said. "You have no idea how deeply rooted your enemies are. You were doomed the day you stepped through the gate seven years ago. You just can't see it—but you will. It is your doom, after all."

"Give me a name," Kalen said. "Give me a name, so Uthias knows who to banish."

"Who do you imagine gave the order?" Trawn chuckled.

"No," Levia said. "That can't be. The Lord Seer would never—"

Trawn spat blood at Levia. "The Eye and the Fire Knives have been allies since long before even you came to Westgate, Sister Horseface. And as for you," he said, turning to Kalen, "Uthias Darkwell has wanted you dead and buried from that first day you challenged him."

At that accusation, Kalen and Cellica both stared, dumbfounded as his words weighed down upon them. Levia breathed faster and faster, her eyes fixed on Trawn's blood-smeared face. She trembled, her hands curling into fists then flattening against her thighs, over and over.

Finally, Kalen broke his silence. "Why?"

"Because you are a threat, scion of Shadowbane," Trawn said. "You have no allies in the Eye, only enemies. Uthias allowed you to peck at the dirt for a time, but the sun will set soon, and it will be time to feast. Your neck is the first upon the block. Her—" He grinned at Cellica. "I get to do what I want with your little goblin of a sister." Trawn drooled blood. "I've never had a halfling before. Can't promise I'll be gentle."

"Can I kill him now?" Cellica looked ill.

Kalen was finding it increasingly hard to justify restraining her. He just couldn't believe it. He knew he had enemies among the Eye, but the High Seer himself? The Eye had declared itself neutral with regard to the Fire Knives, but could they really be allies? House Bleth was a pack of assassins and traitors. How could the Eye have fallen so far, and how had he been blind to it?

The raised voices of watchmen out in the street drew his attention, and the muddy lights of torches clustered outside the bleary windows of the warehouse. Being caught here would be just as bad as anything Trawn had intended, particularly if the traitors in the Eye had sway in the Westgate watch. "We're running out of time," Kalen said.

"We can't take him with us," Cellica said. "Not if those guards are out there."

Trawn sneered at Kalen.

"One last question," Levia wove gray fire around her mace. "Were you to kill me?"

Trawn looked at her, as though he'd totally forgotten her existence. "Uthias didn't mention you. Waste of steel."

Levia stepped forward and brought her flaming mace down on Trawn's head with a wet *thunk*. Bone cracked and he slumped down, his head caved in like a rotted melon. Smoke rose from his seared flesh. Cellica gasped, but Kalen only nodded. It had to be done.

"We need to go," Levia said. "Now."



They got back to a safe house down on the Harbor Loop, one of many bolt-holes Kalen kept separate from the Eye of Justice. It was a rented room over a festhall called the Rosebud, which boasted rooftop access that went unwatched thanks to sufficient coin flowing into the madam's hands. He couldn't guarantee the Eye didn't know about it, however—he had no idea how deep the conspiracy went. If Uthias himself were indeed behind it, the Eye might descend on the Rosebud within the hour.

"Cele," Kalen said. "Settle up with the owner. Say your good-byes. We need to move."

"Right." The halfling had not yet returned her crossbow to her amulet, so tense had been their flight, but she did so now. She even paused to fix her snow-mussed hair so as to make a good impression. She had intimate friends among the celebrants, after all.

Kalen went into his room, limping a little from his injured leg, and began packing.

Levia lingered in the doorway, a confused look on her face. "What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving," Kalen said. "Westgate, the Dragon Coast . . . all of it."

"Leaving?" Levia looked stunned. "I don't understand. Where will you go?"

"Cormyr, perhaps, or Sembia, to fight the Shades. I might go as far as Waterdeep." Kalen folded his spare leathers and fitted them carefully in his pack. He laid four sheathed knives atop his clothes. "Wherever my path might lead, I have to go. I cannot do my duty if I stay here. Uthias has seen to that. The Eye is beyond my power to fix."

"And what of me?" Levia asked. "I have given thirty years of my life to the Eye of Justice—to Westgate. I cannot simply abandon them."

"That is why you aren't coming."

Levia's jaw dropped. "What?"

"The knights succeeded in their task, at least in part," Kalen said. "Cellica and I have fled the city. You sided with Darkwell, seeing the future of the Eye as he does."

"You think that will fool anyone?" Levia asked.

"They know how much I . . . they know of my love for Gedrin and for you."

"If anyone can convince them, it's you. You are by far the best liar I have ever met."

"And you are by far the worst," Levia said. "But say on. What is the purpose of this lie?"

"You spare yourself, for a first," Kalen said, continuing to pack. "If Darkwell wants me dead, he will not hesitate to slay you as my ally. But if I betrayed you and we fought, you can gain Darkwell's confidence, and you can retain your place in the order. Perhaps he will even reward you for turning upon his enemy. But I promise you this, you will be disappointed. The Eye will never be what you would wish."

Most of his armor was packed. He laid his hand on the last piece, propped against his pack on the table: his leather-and-steel helm, which hid his entire face when closed.

"That—that won't—" Levia clutched her hands in white-knuckled fists. "That won't serve. No one will

be fooled. You heard Trawn—the Eye will never stop hunting you.”

Kalen nodded. “Then tell them I am dead. Tell them Cellica and I both lie dead, killed under your mace when we turned on you.”

“What? No.” Levia looked horrified. “Say I murdered you? No one will believe it.”

“Levia,” Kalen seized her arms in his strong hands, hard enough to bruise by her expression. He loosened his grasp, not knowing his own strength. “Levia, you must make them believe it. You know this is the only way.”

“Kalen, I—” She turned her face up to his. “What of this?” She touched Vindicator’s gauntlet-marked hilt on the table. Gray flame rose around her fingers, and she pulled away as though burned. Its activities earlier notwithstanding, it would brook no other wielder than Kalen. “The sword has chosen you. You cannot leave it here.”

“Tell them that when you tried to claim Vindicator, the sword disappeared,” Kalen said. “You do not know where it went, but you hope it found a worthy wielder.”

Levia smiled wanly. “You must really hate me,” she said. “Do you have any idea how Haran will *bristle* at the thought that neither he nor anyone else in the Eye is worthy?”

“Let them think what they will.” Kalen smiled grimly. “The Eye of Justice does not blink. He does not turn his gaze. ‘Shadow and darkness must be pursued in every form, through’—”

“Through every street, down every path, no matter how dark, until it is wiped from the world,” Levia finished. “Gedrin taught me too, Kalen. Why are his words any stronger for you than for me? For any of us?”

“The work of Gedrin Shadowbane must go on,” Kalen said. “And it cannot continue here in Westgate. Not yet.”

“Not yet,” Levia drew in a deep breath. “So . . . you’ll return? You’ll come back to me?”

Kalen considered. “Perhaps. When I—”

She reached up and kissed him. At first, Kalen didn’t even know what she was doing, and then he was too surprised to protest or stop her. Finally, after his heart thudded four times, he managed to push her back. “Levia, what—?”

“Oh.” In an instant, her jubilant expression fell into devastation. “I just—I wasn’t thinking. I shouldn’t have—”

“No,” he said. “No, you shouldn’t have.”

They stood silently in the room, listening to the wind howl outside the window. Then Kalen turned away, and without another word, crossed to the door to go.

“Kalen, wait!” Levia said.

“Kalen Dren is dead,” he said. “I am Shadowbane.” Then he was gone.

WANT TO READ MORE?

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About the Author

Erik Scott de Ble is a fiction writer best known for his work in the FORGOTTEN REALMS® campaign setting, including the third novel in the Shadowbane series, *Shadowbane: Eye of Justice*. “Heir of Shadowbane” is a prequel set before the first Shadowbane novel, *Downshadow*. His work has also appeared in numerous anthologies, including *Realms of the Elves*, *Realms of the Dead*, *When the Hero Comes Home* (and its sequel, *When the Villain Comes Home*), and *Human for a Day*. He moonlights as a game designer, contributing to the *Shadowfell: Gloomwrought and Beyond™* boxed set and the *Neverwinter™* Campaign Setting, as well as the tie-in D&D ENCOUNTERS season, “The Lost Crown of Neverwinter,” and numerous DDI articles.

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