

# SHADOWSFALL LEGENDS



## STORM OF SHADOWS

SEBESTEN'S TALE

by Rick Cox

# Shadowsfall Legends: Storm of Shadows

By  
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Published by Jon Brazer Enterprises

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This story takes place in Shadowsfall, a setting for the Pathfinder Role Playing Game. To find out more about Shadowsfall, goto [JonBrazer.com](http://JonBrazer.com).

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“...Grab it!” snapped Sebesten. Spindle and Thom jumped from the shadows, tossing their ends of the weighted net. Sebesten swung down from the thick tree branch and

planted his feet in the chest of the entangled zombie. The creature stumbled and fell, buried beneath the net. Sebesten dropped to his knees on the thing's chest, pinning it while his companions wrapped it up.

The zombie was fairly fresh. It still had most of its teeth and both eyes. The eyes were milky green orbs floating in a mess of desiccated flesh. The nose and ears, usually the first parts to go, were mostly intact, save a few nibbles here and there. The zombie's tongue twitched along its jawline, poking through a large gash in the right cheek.

"Seb, you gotta get off it now. We need to take it." Spindle said quietly. He tugged at the net as a reminder to the shadowman. Sebesten stood up slowly, eyes locked on the undead thrashing at his feet.

"Something's not right about this one, boys. Look at it. Teeth look as good as they can, no chips or cracks. Fingernails, save the pointer fingers, are in fair condition."

Thom exchanged a look with Spindle as they lifted the now-trussed zombie into the special harness. Crafted of hardened leather, it resembled a cross between a drummer's shoulder mount and a human sized ox yoke. The zombie, net and all, was placed horizontal on a set of brackets supporting a set of metal hooks. The left harness had the hooks on the back of the apparatus; the right had them on the front. The net, slung between the two sets of hooks, allowed the two men to lug the packaged zombie while keeping their hands free. If the monsters were older and thinner, they could sometimes stack two or three in the makeshift hammock strung between the two. Both men were hardy ex-militiamen, capable of hustling across open ground for hours without tiring. They used to carry it on their shoulders, but that tied up their hands.

"Watch your knots!" Spindle exclaimed, nudging Thom. "Those look sloppy! I wouldn't string up my undead ma with those knots!"

Thom tossed Spindle a withering glare. "There's nothing wrong with my knots. They've been strong as can be for the

past three years. You're the one that needs to watch how you tie-

"Not again!" Spindle rolled his eyes. "Once! Once only did I forget to tie the knots good! Ask Seb! Not since we started usin' his rig, more than a year now. Tell him, Seb. Tell him that it was only that once."

"It was only one time, but the cargo, Spindle, the cargo!" Thom chortled.

Spindle snorted as he double checked the knots on the current cargo.

"Bring in a hundred good packages, and all they remember is the sack o' kobolds..."

"There were almost a dozen, Spindle. We could have rested well for at least a month on those earnings." Sebesten commented, moving closer to inspect the thrashing figure.

"Just a sack o' rotted lizards anyway. Not sure why they wanted so much for 'em." Spindle the muttered.

"Heave it in three, Thom. One, two, three!"

Sebesten watched them load up the zombie, which struggled against the bonds to no avail. Unsheathing a dagger, he slit open its chest with a flick of his wrist.

"Hey!" Thom yelled. "They don't pay as much for damaged goods!"

"Look at this. With as hard as I kicked it, those ribs should have shattered, or at least dislodged from the sternum." He fished around in the struggling viscera of the zombie. "Nothing more than some minor cracks. This thing is fresh. Too fresh."

Both of the other men stared at the open wound for a moment. "So what's it mean, then, Seb?"

Sebesten stood up, and turned his eyes deeper into the tree line. He scanned the area around them, turning the time after the question into a pregnant pause, which gave birth to an awkward silence. Spindle and Thom exchanged looks and a shrug, wondering what the ranger saw. They both knelt to hook into the harness, when Sebesten uttered a single word.

"Deathland."

“Now wait a second, you can’t be serious! I thought the nearest one was Splinter Spawn! That’s four hundred some miles from here! There’s no way it coulda wandered this far!”

Sebesten started off into the trees.

“Return to town. Get the money for this one. Don’t let Eluarde take too much off for the chest wound. I’ll meet you at The Cellar tonight for a drink. You can be at the road within half an hour if you move fast. It’s clear, so you won’t have any trouble with more rovers.”

Thom shrugged. “If you say so, Seb. Be safe out there.” The two tightened the buckles to their specially made vests, which allowed for quick release if danger approached.

Sebesten nodded absently, and turned to leave. He moved past the tree he had hidden in minutes before and reached out an arm towards the branches. A dark shape wound around his arm, traveling across his shoulders. He absently patted the shadow snake’s head.

The land sloped downward, towards a ravine that split the forest. A rickety rope bridge spanned the gap a few miles a way, connecting a game trail that ran through the forest. On this side, a massive tree lay across the ravine, a hollowed-out bridge that an ogre could walk through without bumping its ugly head. The downed tree crouched at the base of the slope. From this distance, Sebesten could see flickering movement on the opposite side of the gap.

Moving silently, he picked his way down. As he drew closer, he caught fleeting glimpses of the figures. Stiff legged, shambling, limbs dangling, heads lolling on splintered bones. He also saw a pinprick of light.

*Torches?*

Curiosity piqued anew, he moved faster down the hill, counting on the trees to shield his movement from whoever required torches to move through the darkened forest. The piles of dead, wet leaves made a soft *shushing* sound as he moved, using the tree branches and trunks to aid his downward movement. As neared the bottom, the snake on his shoulder slipped onto a branch.

“Stay safe, Slither.” Sebesten whispered.

At the base of the hill, Sebesten saw clearly what was heading his way. A line of undead, mostly zombies, snaked down the trail. The horde stretched as far as he could see into the trees. The whispering friction of dead skin and creaking tendons washed over him in a wave, drowning out any normal forest sounds. This was easily the biggest single mob of undead he’d seen, and the sinking feeling in his stomach echoed the uncertainty of the situation.

*How could such an army be moving cohesively?* Seb wondered. He finally reached the tree bridge, and quietly climbed up the side. The few broken stumps of old branches provided enough low cover for him to move across the gap, watching the force that approached. Kneeling on the ancient tree, he felt the wood crumble in his hand. The smell of wood rot filled his nostrils, and he smiled as a plan began to form.

His smile faded quickly, as he saw the vanguard of the approaching horde. A giant creature stumped into view, its massive legs supporting its rotted torso. Reptilian skin flapped with every step, and its giant horned head swung back and forth. The two horns that protruded from above its eyes were still sharp, while the splintered base of a horn poked out from above the remains of its nose. The crest of bone that flared up from its forehead and angled back over its neck had already lost most of the skin and flesh. It provided a thick shield of bone for its rider, who carried a glowing staff held aloft.

The triceratops’ head covered most of the figure riding it, but a glimpse of fluid movement beneath the robes confirmed that it was alive. Sebesten slid his bow from his back and quietly notched an arrow. The dinosaur and its rider were about fifty yards from the tree bridge, and the rest of the advance patrol rounded the bend. Another group of four undead followed, heading towards the bridge. Sebesten followed the trail upward, and saw that this vanguard was well ahead of the approaching masses, giving him some time to find a way to slow the tide.

Sebesten moved forward quickly, using the low cover to get a closer look at the rider. He sidestepped a large hole in the trunk, glancing down to see the interior of the tree. The insides were dark, and the bottom was covered with a carpet of dried twigs and leaves.

*Perfect tinder*, he thought to himself.

His keen eyes picked up a subtle movement in the trees above the rider, and he smiled as he recognized a familiar serpentine shape. The rider shifted and stood up in the makeshift saddle. Sebesten caught a glimpse of what looked like a holy symbol. This rider was most likely some young acolyte, judging by the plain robes and the undoubtedly boring role as advance patrol leader.

With quick, smooth movements, Sebesten drew back the arrow and let it fly, sending it towards the cleric's throat. The missile skipped off the dinosaur's bony forehead, altering its trajectory. Instead of burying itself in the soft throat of the cleric, it landed solidly in his shoulder. The cleric yelled in surprise, dropping the staff to the ground.

The dark, sinuous rope fell from the trees and landed on the cleric's shoulders. The surprised yell turned to one of pain as Slither lashed out with his fangs, tearing open the cleric's cheek.

Sebesten ran forward, firing on the run at the other zombies that started to move. His arrow thudded into the chest of a male zombie with a sickening sound. It stumbled back into a tree, fighting to keep its footing.

The triceratops started forward, tossing its head and snapping its teeth. It lumbered towards the bridge. The acolyte wrestled with the shadow snake, falling from the dinosaur's back as he flailed at the reptilian assailant. The other zombies milled about, heading Sebesten's way. Sebesten fired off another arrow at the male zombie, pinning it to a tree through its rotted shoulder.

*Thud!* The hollowed out tree trunk shuddered beneath his feet as the beast slammed its massive head into the wood. Splinters flew through the air, and fell into the ravine. A large

crack lanced through the top of the tree. Sebesten cursed under his breath at having to give up his high ground so quickly. He launched a third arrow, which knocked inches above the previous. The zombie's rotted flesh tore away from its shoulder, leaving it hanging by a thin strip of skin.

Sebesten rushed to the edge of the tree and looked at the beast below. The thick sheet of bone was directly below him, arcing back and forth as the thing tossed its head. Bow stowed safely across his back, the shadowman drew his short sword. The blade glittered in the growing dark. Taking a deep breath, Sebesten dropped down onto the back of the undead triceratops.

The mass of undead flesh writhed and bucked beneath him, and he buried his blade between the shoulder blades of the beast. He held onto the hilt with both hands as the dinosaur attempted to rear up on its hind legs, smashing its heavy forehead into the top edge of the tree bridge. Rotten wood splintered, raining down upon both the beast and the ranger.

Sebesten felt a hand wrap around his boot, and he turned to see that the three remaining zombies had closed in. He kicked out once, sending the zombie reeling and trailing teeth. He pulled his blade from the triceratops's back and rolled backwards, narrowly avoiding more grasping hands.

Completing his backward tumble, Sebesten dropped off the beast, keeping the zombies on the other side of the mobile meat shield. His blade lashed out, gouging chunks out of the beast's back leg. Desiccated tendons snapped as the fine blade sliced through them. The creature started to backpedal, and the shadowman quickly got out of the way.

As Seb turned, he could see that the cleric had regained his footing and was trying desperately to stomp on Slither. Blood poured from numerous facial wounds, and Sebesten was pretty sure that one of the cleric's eyes was all but useless. Sebesten flung himself at the wounded cleric, his blade flashing down towards the back of the thigh. Unlike the undead, a severed hamstring will incapacitate a living being.



The cleric howled in agony as his leg crumpled beneath him.

Sebesten buried his sword in the man's chest, cutting his scream into a wet gurgle. The dying cleric's hands wrapped around the blade, holding it as if to keep his impending death at bay. Prying the dying man from his weapon with a booted foot to the cleric's gaping, ragged torso, Sebesten turned around to face the three approaching zombies.

As they shambled towards him, he had time to notice that they, too, were in fairly good condition. The only real wounds they sported were superficial, and the one he had bashed in the face bore no other injury. Even the fleshy parts of the face, like the nose and ears, were mostly intact.

Sebesten moved towards the three, his blade flashing and spinning. Limbs spun in the dirt, and soon three dismembered corpses littered the area. The triceratops had finally turned around, and was moving towards him. Sebesten moved to his left, watching the beast track his movements. He knew he couldn't hurt it from the front - that plate of bone would foil all of his attacks. Sebesten moved, making sure to stay out of reach of the beast. He lashed out with the flat of his blade, smacking the dinosaur's face, keeping its attention on him.

If he could lure it into the tree line, he could get around it and finish it quickly. Sebesten continued to smack the beast, dodging its lowered horns. Then a sudden, sharp ripping sound echoed from behind him and a weight slammed into his back, forcing him towards the beast.

He had forgotten the zombie pinned to the tree.

"Dammit!" Sebesten growled.

The zombie had wrapped its only arm around him from the back, hindering his sword arm. Its teeth gnashed, snapping at his throat. Sebesten lurched sideways, dodging the large horns of the dinosaur. The zombie stayed attached to him, its filthy claws caught in his cloak, nails digging into his armor. He wasn't worried about the nails piercing his chain shirt, but the snapping teeth could be a problem if they got ahold of flesh.

Sebesten reached up and grabbed hold of the zombie's

face, his thumb digging deep into one eye socket. Cold fluid washed over his hand and splashed onto the side of his face. The foul smell of rot made him want to vomit, but he kept hold. Sebesten moved in a macabre dance with the one armed zombie, eyes locked on the weaving horns of the triceratops. The gigantic beast lunged forward, spear-like horns aimed towards Sebesten's chest. The shadowman dropped to his knees, keeping his free arm locked above. He pivoted the zombie forward into the path of the horn.

The tip slashed across Sebesten's arm, drawing a line of fiery pain. The horn slammed into the chest of the one-armed zombie, carrying it upward into the air, impaled. The beast shook its head, but the zombie was stuck fast. Sebesten rolled away from the stomping feet, and took stock of his arm. The wound hurt, but it wasn't serious. Sebesten moved back, and took the holy symbol off the dead cleric. He stuck this in a belt pouch. The Baron of Blackbat would be most interested in this evidence.

Sebesten threw a look over his shoulder, and saw that the approaching mass of undead had drawn closer. He saw more of them dribbling down the trail. Hundreds. Sebesten knew he had to do something to slow them down.

He circled around the beast, towards the bridge. The triceratops continued to track his movements, the one armed zombie impaled on the horn flopping weirdly with every jerk of the dinosaur's head. Sebesten started to move backwards until he was at the edge of the ravine. He had one hand on the tree trunk, and with the other, he slashed at the dinosaur's face. He felt the blade connect, but knew most of the force was turned aside by the heavy plate of bone. He waited until the beast lowered its head to charge, then leapt up onto the side of the tree. The beast moved forward, not realizing that the ground ended. Its front legs stepped off into nothingness, and its weight carried it down into the ravine.

Sebesten grinned at the loud slap of undead flesh hitting the rock bottom. He pulled himself up onto the tree trunk and sat, panting. He saw the wave of undead moving further

down the trail, inching closer to the bridge. He had only a few minutes before they would be staging down near the ravine. He dropped to his belly when he saw a familiar shape approaching the bridge. He removed his bow and lowered it to the ground, allowing Slither to curl around it. Sebesten pulled the snake up and let it settle on his shoulders.

Sebesten dropped down onto the ground and walked into the opening about fifteen feet. He removed a few lengths of rope, and quickly sliced them from the coil. Using the hilt of his dagger, he punched holes in the tree trunk, and tied the ends of the rope tightly to both sides of the bridge. The tripwire would slow some of them down for a bit. A thinking being would notice the crude trap, but the unthinking dead would shamle right into it.

Sebesten untied a small leather pouch that was attached to his boot and kissed it. "Thank you, Kero!" he said as a small grin crossed his pale face. He placed the small leather pouch down in the leaves, roughly where a humanoid's chest would be if it fell over the tripwire. The pouch, given to Sebesten by a wanderer mage named Kero as payment for gathering some items he needed to work his magic, would keep the zombies in place better than most of the many of the alchemical items he bought off of the dark-scaled kobold in Blackbat.

*Well, Sebesten admitted to himself, that's what Kero said, anyways. I just hope he was right.*

Sebesten moved to the middle of the bridge, to the opening he had seen earlier. He jumped and caught the lip and pulled himself up. He saw that some of the undead had started to filter into the clearing at the edge of the ravine. They milled about, but didn't advance. *Waiting for orders*, Sebesten thought darkly.

The shadowman took out a flask of lantern oil and poured some of its contents down the hole. He moved forward across the bridge, filling up more holes in the dried wood until the flask was empty. Sebesten took out his bow once more, and sighted into the throng of zombies. He saw a

living being, another of the necromancers that marshaled the force. He let fly with an arrow, knowing that at this range the impact would not be serious. His goal wasn't to kill, but to irritate. The arrow struck true and slapped against the chest of the cleric. The cleric roared in anger, and ducked as another arrow flew across the chasm.

The cleric thrust forward with his staff, commanding the army around it to move forward, towards the threat. Sebesten smiled widely. He loosed one more arrow just to make sure the cleric was sufficiently enraged, and then ducked down behind a branch. He could hear the plodding of the undead on the bridge below. He took out his flint and steel, and started a small bit of tinder on fire he shielded this until it burned softly. He sheltered the flame, listening as the undead shambled further on. He watched them pass below him, moving with the burning intensity of their controller.

He heard the first one hit the tripwire. A thud followed by a wet squelching sound, and other thumps as more of the undead tripped up. He dropped the burning tinder. A soft *woof* as the flames caught, and the bed of dead leaves started to smolder. The lantern oil started to burn merrily, spreading down the line. Flames licked at the rags of the undead, singeing and burning the dried-out flesh. The rotten wood of the tree bridge started to catch, and smoke billowed up from below. The undead piled onto the bridge, urged on by the enraged cleric. They pressed forward relentlessly, pushing up against the pile of zombies felled by the tripwire, clogging up the bridge.

Fire licked out of the cracks in the tree, and the smell of burning flesh filled the air. A loud crack shattered the air, and the bridge lurched. The rotten wood splintered beneath the weight and the fire, and split in the middle. Dozens of zombies spilled out, falling into the ravine. Sebesten grinned as he imagined them joining their triceratops friend. The tree, ablaze, gave up and fell into the ravine. The cleric bellowed on the other side, waving his arms and battering the undead around him.

Sebesten grinned, and moved into the tree line. If he was lucky, he could get to the rope bridge before any undead made it across.

The rope bridge creaked and swayed as a line of undead moved across. The rickety contraption had already claimed three victims as planks gave way under the weight of the zombies. The monster closest to the edge of the ravine stepped off the bridge and moved to the side. An arrow punched through the side of its skull, sending it off balance. The zombie stumbled and fell silently into the ravine.

Sebesten emerged from the trees, dropping his bow and drawing both of his swords. He charged through a knot of milling undead, lashing out with his right hand to sweep the head off the decaying shoulders of a female zombie, while his left hand smashed the ribcage of a nearby skeleton. The ranger swept the legs out from beneath another, following the falling corpse with an arcing blade. Another head parted from a body, rolling in the dust.

Sebesten ran to the bridge, lashing out at any limb that came too close. He sheathed a sword and planted his hands on the anchor points of the bridge, swinging his legs up and kicking out into the chest of the creature closest to the end. The line stumbled back, giving him time to shear through the ancient and frayed ropes.

The first rope parted, and the bridge shuddered and leaned to the side, spilling undead into the darkness below. Sebesten cut the other rope, sending the bridge plummeting into space. Those few bodies that had remained on the bridge fell silently. He heard soft thumps as they hit the ground below.

He quickly dispatched the few undead that had made it across, tossing their bodies into the ravine. When the last one was thrown over the side, he looked at the mass of undead across the gap. The clearing at the edge of the chasm was slowly filling. The bodies started edging into the trees and steep slope that ended the ravine. The footing was treacherous enough for a living being, and he knew that the

horde would suffer great casualties attempting to cross.

Retrieving his bow, Sebesten glanced back once more. He saw large shapes, little more than hulking shadows, lurching through the trees. They moved slowly towards the chasm, pushing aside the trees that stood in their way. He watched in horror as a hill giant emerged from the trees, its skin hanging loose from its body. The flesh from its face was gone, leaving a large, pitted skull bearing a rictus grin. The behemoth moved at an unseen command and grabbed hold of the base of a large tree, wrenching it from side to side.

The tree groaned in protest and resisted the giant's strength, until a second one joined in. This one grabbed ahold of the other side of the tree and, in disconcerting unison, pushed it towards the ground. Sebesten heard the roots snap and the wood scream as it broke. The top of the tree slammed into the dirt near him.

"Bloody hell, they're making their own bridge," he mused. Sebesten turned and broke into a jog. He had slowed them down some, but he hadn't stopped them completely. It was all too apparent that this was an invading force, driven on by dark priests of some profane faith. He fished out the emblem he had taken off of the dead cleric. His eyes widened as he recognized the symbol.

*Orcus!*

There were shadows on the horizon, a vast puzzle of which he could see naught but the corner pieces. Something big was coming, a danger unlike anything he'd seen before. He had to move - and *quickly*.

Sebesten picked up his pace, running through the forest with ease. He had to find Kero and let him know of the danger. He had to find Thom and Spindle and send them to some outlying settlements.

Most importantly, Sebesten had to warn the Baron. A storm was gathering, the dark energies swirling into an inexorable vortex - and it was headed straight towards Blackbat.

# # #

**Deathland.** Throughout Shadowsfall exist areas so thoroughly tainted with necromantic energy that undead spontaneously animate, mostly mindless zombies and skeletons. These areas are known as deathlands. Any living creature that enters a deathland begins to bleed out its life force, and will die within a matter of days to mere minutes, depending on the individual area's strength and size. The largest deathland on the Southern Peninsula of Shadowsfall is Splinter Spawn; however, many smaller deathlands hide in mountain cracks, dark forests, deep caves and even at the bottoms of rivers and lakes. Despite the best efforts of powerful spellcasters to seal or destroy the deathlands, new deathlands form constantly. Evil clerics, necromancers and powerful undead such as vampires or liches use the undead hordes produced by a deathland as their own personal, ready-made armies with which to attack the living strongholds. It is this type of coordinated assault that the strongholds of Shadowsfall guard against—and pray that they never have to face.

# # #

**About the Author:** Rick Cox moonlights as The Drunken Mime, a writer for Total Party Kill Games. He has contributed to the Infamous Adversaries product line, The Malefactor base class, and the upcoming sandbox adventure “The Bleeding Hollow.” During the day, his alter ego works with at risk youth He lives in Cedar Rapids, IA, with his wife, their 5 dogs and two cats of questionable mental stability.