

THE BUTCHER'S WORKSHOP

HE SOUND IS A DEAD, FLESHY thing. Not the sharp crack of a hammer, but a wet, heavy punctuation to the tomb's deep silence. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* It comes from a door down the hall, painted a flaking blood-red, a crude white "X" scrawled across its center.

"Well," Doctor Pepe whispers, "that's not ominous at all." He starts toward it, a moth to a very ugly flame. The rest of the party stays behind in the forge, awaiting Doctor Pepe's signals.

Kragor grunts. "Looks like he has chosen the door with the warning, Gerhard."

The ranger shifts his weight, positioning himself in the forge's doorway. "Aye. You want to maybe get behind him in case something really bad happens? I can hide behind you."

"Let him learn his lesson," Kragor rumbles, not unkindly.

Amused, Gerhard quietly moves into the hallway and takes position, ready to shoot any horror that should come into view.

Doctor Pepe, oblivious, is already at work. He kneels, his tools a silver glint in the arcane light. He listens, probes, and after a moment, gives a confident nod. A *click* echoes down the hall.

The thumping inside pauses. Then resumes, heavier, more frantic.

Doctor Pepe places his hand on the door, intending to crack it just an inch. He rolls his wrist. He fumbles. The door swings wide open with a groan.

The room beyond is a debris-filled mess. A creature, nearly nine feet tall—a grotesque parody of a man sewn from the mismatched parts of others—turns from its work of hammering a table into shards. It looks at the rogue, its dead eyes fixing on him, and charges.

Startled, Pepe scrambles back, trips, and falls over the threshold into the room.

"By Kord's broken shield," Kragor roars.

As the flesh golem reaches him, Doctor Pepe expertly regains his footing. He darts and slashes, but the monster hardly notices. He bolts back into the hallway as arrows and javelins sink into its hide, mere annoyances.

A fist the size of a small boulder comes down. The rogue's ribs give way with a sound like snapping branches. A second blow hammers the air from his lungs, and he collapses, a broken marionette.

"Doctor Pepe!" Elara's cry is a razor's edge. Her arrow slams into the golem's chest, followed by a single, piercing note—"Encore!"—a command to the flesh. The healing light is a violent shock, forcing his heart to thunder, his lungs to gasp.

Scarlet's hand shoots forward, cupping a perfect flame. She casts it. The fire splashes across the golem's face, a liquid, noiseless incandescence. The creature recoils as though doused in acid, its stitched features a mask of primal horror.

Halite, stunned for a half-second, throws a trident. It flies wide. "Blast!" A second follows, striking the golem's leg with enough force to topple it. The behemoth crashes to the floor, prone and flailing.

"Stay down, you stitched-up bastard!" Kragor snarls, marking the beast with a sickly violet hex. He grips his war hammer, and a beam of crackling, star-dusted darkness erupts from its head. Where it hits, flesh bursts and rots.

The party descends on the downed monster. Whisper's claws find a seam and rip it open. Doctor Pepe, groaning to his feet, adds two more small wounds. Burning radiance and fire rain down, arrows pierce, followed by a final blast of eldritch force. The creature gives

one last, shuddering groan and collapses, its stitches bursting, its composite parts slumping into a grotesque, inanimate heap.

Silence falls once more. The party breathes heavily, staring at the carnage. "Well," Kragor says, studying the remains. "That was... educational. He's made of bits of everything."

Doctor Pepe, his face pale, searches the golem's room. "Nothing," he reports, his voice shaky. "Just rubble."

A STORM OF BLADES

"Right," Kragor says, nodding to the door opposite. "You're up again. Try not to fall down this time?"

They take their positions. "Let's try that gambit," Kragor says to Elara.

In a sing-song voice, Elara chants, "*Imago fallax*." A shimmering image of the door appears inches in front of the real one. Kragor's spectral hand drifts through it, grasps the true handle, and pulls.

A longsword, humming with malevolent energy, slices silently through the illusion and bites deep into Whisper's side. A second, third, and fourth follow, a whirlwind of steel erupting from the unseen doorway.

"They can see through it!" Gerhard yells.

A fifth and sixth sword emerge. One finds Whisper's flesh again, and she collapses, unconscious. Another flies down the hall in pursuit of Doctor Pepe and stabs him in the back. He falls, out cold.

"I'm beginning to sense a pattern here," Kragor groans, clutching a new wound in his arm.

The sight of her companions falling drives a cold spike through Scarlet's heart. She gathers dust and arcane light, spinning them into a familiar shape. An owl of bone-white and dusk-grey feathers settles on her shoulder, its eyes twin pools of fey intelligence. Her command is a thought loosed like an arrow: *Go*.

The owl streaks down the hall and lands on

Doctor Pepe's chest. A wave of healing energy flows from its talons. The rogue's eyes snap open.

Kragor whispers "*Mactē virtutē*", and a shimmering carapace of supernatural ice blooms over his skin. One of the fae-lit blades swings for his head. It strikes the phantom armor with a sound like a hammer hitting a frozen coffin. A silent explosion of absolute cold erupts, and the sword's animating magic is snuffed out. The enchanted steel screams as it crystallizes, then shatters into a thousand glittering splinters.

Halite's trident catches another sword's flat. With a jarring *thrum*, a violent shiver runs the length of the blade, and its magic breaks. It clatters to the stone, inert. Elara rushes to Whisper's side, a surge of celestial power knitting her wounds.

The tide turns. Gerhard's scimitar flashes, shearing through a faint glyph at a blade's hilt. Doctor Pepe, with a furious, two-handed wrench, breaks the magic of the sword that felled him. Whisper, a storm of grey fur, leaps from the wall, her kicks and slaps sending another blade spinning to the floor.

Only one remains. Before it can choose a victim, Elara's silver-tipped arrow leaves the string. It strikes the pommel, and with a sigh of escaping energy, the sword falls. Its clang echoes in the sudden, profound silence.

THE ECHO OF STEEL

Doctor Pepe approaches the doorway, knowing the shimmering image before him is Elara's phantom. His mind knows this. His body, however, remembers the steel.

He peeks his head through, and the world lurches. A memory of pain, sharp and absolute, seizes him. He doesn't trip so much as crumple, pitching forward through the dissolving illusion. His hands, thrown out to break his fall, land squarely on the pile of razor-edged, broken swords. The impact tears open ugly wounds. He bites back a scream, his knuckles white as

he grips the hilt of a shattered blade.

Elara winces, letting the last of the illusion fade. It reveals their companion kneeling in a pile of broken steel, his head bowed in utter, silent humiliation.

The room beyond is a graveyard of steel. Amidst the ruin, one sliver of integrity endures. Doctor Pepe's eye catches a glint. Buried under rusted spearheads is a longsword, pristine. The blade is the color of a gathering thunderhead, its flat, non-reflective grey seeming to drink the light. Within its substance, faint, silvery veins race like a storm trapped in steel. The hilt is wrapped in pale, petrified lizard-skin.

Kragor, focusing his arcane senses anew, approaches. "You've found a magic sword," he announces. Doctor Pepe grins excitedly.

Exhausted and wounded, they retreat to the golem's room and barricade the door. Sleep is not a luxury; it is a necessity. They set the watch.

Kragor takes the first, war hammer across his knees, senses stretched into the oppressive silence. Halite's watch is a study in brutal stillness, the cramped, foul-smelling hole gnawing at him, every scrape and slither a phantom threat. Doctor Pepe's watch is a torment. He huddles near the door, a porcelain doll cracked and crudely glued, the memory of fists and steel a fresh phantom limb of pain. His confidence is a ruin. Whisper takes the last, a grey shadow among shadows, coiled, a spring of deadly potential.

The arcane light flickers, a new day of sorts arrives. They are not restored, not truly. They are merely... less broken. The gnawing dread recedes, leaving a hollow ache of exhaustion.

Doctor Pepe rises, his gaze falling upon the longsword. "That is a thing for a butcher, not a surgeon," he muses. He looks at his bandaged hands, remembers the fumbling chaos. That is the longsword's world, a brutal ballet for which he has no training. His own dance is quieter, played with the slim dagger

Kragor gave him weeks ago. Acknowledging the truth of his own nature, he hefts the longsword and offers it, hilt-first, to the orc.

"This sings a song I do not know how to dance to," he says.

Kragor's calloused hand closed around the hilt. The weapon felt wrong—too light, too clever. He craved the familiar, honest heft of a war hammer, the straightforward crush of steel on bone. But a cold power hummed within the blade, a bitter advantage he was forced to claim.

He puts down his war hammer, grips the sword's lizard-skin hilt, and shuts his eyes. At his feet, the hammer shimmers and vanishes into greasy black smoke. Darkness snakes from his palm, sinking into the blade like ink into water. The sword pulses once with a faint, violet light, a malevolent heartbeat now in time with his own. The bond is forged.

He opens his eyes, looks at Doctor Pepe. "I know this tune," he rumbles. "It is a dirge."

BRACHYURAN INTERLUDE

Two doors remain. Doctor Pepe, moving like a man made of glass, approaches the first. The handle turns with unnerving silence. He eases the door inward. A blast of cold air sighs out, heavy with brine and the rot of the sea bed.

The chamber beyond is breached. Black water pools across the floor. Two iron-bound chests loll in the deeps. Then, motion. A carapace the size of a shield scuttles from the shadows, its claws snapping with a sharp, wet *clack*. Another appears, and a third. From a bed of kelp, a fourth rises, a true behemoth, its stalked eyes fixing on the doorway.

Doctor Pepe has had his fill of being a toy for monsters. Silently, he eases the door shut. He turns to the others to share what he's seen.

"Leave the crabs be," Gerhard advises, his gaze already on the final door. "We don't have time

for seafood."

FEROL SAL

Having charted every other passage, their quest now rested on this final, unopened door. Doctor Pepe approaches it as a penitent approaches the block. He is a creature of nerve endings and scar tissue now, his every movement a careful negotiation with pain. His hands, swathed in Elara's bandages, are clumsy ghosts of their former selves as he kneels. The lock-picking tools are a familiar weight, but the confidence is gone. He probes the keyhole out of sheer, desperate habit, a prayer offered to a god he no longer trusts.

Nothing. No click of a pressure plate. No whisper of a scything blade being set. Nothing.

He presses his ear to the wood. He hears only the frantic drumming of his own heart and the faint, dry rustle of... something. Paper? Bone? He cannot tell. He sets his palm against the cold, pitted iron of the ring-pull, takes a breath, and pulls.

The door swings inward on silent, well-oiled hinges.

A smell washes over him—of dust as old as mountains, of strange, acrid chemicals that sting the back of the throat, and something else... the dry, sweet scent of decay. He peers into the gloom.

Beyond is a laboratory. Tables are crowded with alchemical equipment, bookshelves line the walls, and barrels of strangely bubbling liquids stand in the corners. In the center of the room, a figure in elaborate red robes hunches over a desk, working frantically. It is undead, its skin gray and tight over its skull, its eyes sunken pits, its teeth long, its fingers tipped with claws. Beyond it, two suits of animated armor move about the room, fetching and carrying.

The creature looks up, its skull-face a mask of desiccated irritation. A sound issues from its throat, a dry, whispering rustle like dead leaves skittering across a tombstone. The sounds

mean nothing to Doctor Pepe, a dead noise in a dead place. His mind stalls, then lurches. The ring! His bandaged fingers, clumsy with pain, fumble the silver circlet from his pouch and press it onto his thumb.

The wight makes the sound again, louder this time, impatient. Now, the alien syllables arrive in Pepe's mind as a cold, clear thought, a voice of ancient arrogance superimposed over the rattling hiss. *Who are you to interrupt me? Why do you trespass in my workshop?*

"We seek a cure for our friends," Doctor Pepe says, his own voice sounding thin and shockingly alive in this dead air. He speaks the Common tongue, a hopeful, desperate gambit.

The creature's sunken eyes are pits of black incomprehension. It perceives only vermin within its sterile sanctum. With a deliberate motion, it raises a long, dusky finger, tipped with a nail resembling a shard of obsidian, and stabs it in the air. First it points toward the nearest suit of animated armor, then toward the rogue. The command needs no translation. With a groan of tortured metal, the armor takes a step forward.

The animated armor is a ponderous, grinding thing of iron and malice. But Whisper is a blur of grey fur and coiled fury. Before the construct can complete its second step, she is past it, a living arrow aimed at the hunched figure at the desk. Her movement is a fluid, predatory pounce, a controlled explosion that locks her onto the undead thing. With the leverage of a striking cat, she ensnares the creature, her grip like iron bands around its brittle torso. The thing is shockingly light, a bundle of dry bones and ancient cloth. With a grunt of effort, she heaves, dragging the hissing wight out of its sanctum and into the chaos of the hallway.

She does not release her hold. She begins a rattling cascade of open-hand blows against its ribcage, a staccato of punches that echo like a mallet against dry wood. Her claws are sheathed; this is a pummelling, a desperate attempt to break the thing before it can

properly fight back.

“He’s fast!” Gerhard yells, his spectral brand flaring to life on the wight’s chest. His arrow follows an instant later, a bodkin-tipped prayer that sinks deep into the creature’s shoulder.

Halite roars, a battle-cry swallowed by the narrow hall, and swings his trident in a wide, gleaming arc. The wight, impossibly quick, twists in Whisper’s grasp, and the tines bite only air. Cursing, the goliath surges, a second swing just as fast as the first, and just as fruitless. Frustrated, Halite backpedals, trying to find space to fight. As he moves, the creature’s skeletal hand darts to its belt, drawing a longsword whose blade glows with a sickly green light. It lashes out, a parting gift for the retreating goliath, but Halite’s shield catches the blow with a jarring clang.

The animated armors, their master now embattled, lumber into the hall. They are single-minded, ignoring the melee to follow their last order. The first reaches Doctor Pepe, its iron fist slamming into his side with the force of a battering ram, driving the air from his lungs. Its second swing goes wide. The second suit of armor is more accurate. Two crushing, piston-like blows land square on the rogue’s chest, one after the other. He staggers, his vision swimming in a sea of black stars.

Through the pain, Doctor Pepe sees his opening. He stumbles forward, dagger first, but the thrust is clumsy, deflected by the wight’s flailing robes. His shortsword, however, finds its home, slicing a deep gash across the undead thing’s desiccated thigh.

From the back of the formation, Elara draws. The arrowhead of her nocked shaft glows with a soft, silver light. The string sings. The arrow is a comet of purification, striking the wight just below the clavicle. There is a sound of cracking ancient bone and a hiss as holy energy sears unholy flesh. The creature reels.

Kragor plants his feet, a rock in the swirling tide of battle. He extends a hand, a single, guttural word of hexing power clinging to the

wight like a shroud. Then he levels the new longsword, channeling his will through the thunder-grey steel. A beam of star-dusted darkness erupts from its tip, striking the creature with the force of entropy itself.

The wight ignores the arrows, the spells, the blade in its leg. It focuses its ancient hatred on the creature holding it. Its clawed fingers, hard as obsidian, dig into Whisper’s flesh. It is not a cut, but a violation. A sucking cold floods the tabaxi’s body, a chilling void where her life-force used to be. She feels a part of her soul being siphoned away, devoured by the abyss in the creature’s touch. Before she can even scream, its glowing green longsword scythes across her middle. The world dissolves into a final, agonizing slash of pain, and she collapses, a heap of grey fur on the cold stone.

“Whisper!” Scarlet cries, her face a mask of horror. Her hands move, weaving light and dust. The spectral owl, Sparky, coalesces on her shoulder, its feathers the color of dusk and ash, stark against the gloom.

Whisper’s soul clings to a single, fraying thread. On the black precipice of death, she holds.

Gerhard’s face is grim. He draws, looses, and his second arrow lands with even greater force than his first, staggering the wight. Halite, seeing his opening, hurls his trident like a javelin. It soars past the wight’s ear and clatters harmlessly down the hall. “Damn my eyes!” he bellows.

The armors continue their grim work. One slams its fist into Halite’s shield, a blow so powerful it nearly tears the arm from his socket. The second suit swings twice at the goliath, its iron fists glancing off his pauldron and shield with percussive, harmless clangs.

Doctor Pepe, seeing Whisper fall, knows he is next. He fires his crossbow, the bolt striking the wight’s chest, then dives for the cover of a nearby doorway, his heart hammering against his bruised ribs.

Seeing the life drain from the tabaxi, a defiance born of desperation seizes Elara. “Not yet!”

she shouts, her voice a clarion call. Another arrow flies, a shot that finds an impossible, perfect opening, burying itself deep in the wight's throat. It stumbles back, clutching the shaft, its hissing voice growing ragged. Without pausing, Elara sings a single, sharp word of healing. A golden warmth washes over Whisper, knitting sinew and sealing wounds. The tabaxi's eyes snap open. She is whole again, her wounds sealed, yet a deep, abiding chill remains—a hollow space where the wight's touch stole something vital, something the gods' healing cannot replace.

The wight is grievously wounded, its unholy vitality guttering like a cheap candle in a gale. It turns its hollow eyes toward Kragor, sensing the source of the dark power that eats at its being. It takes a single, shaky step.

This is the moment. Kragor surges forward, crossing the distance in three pounding strides, a green-skinned avalanche of vengeance. He brings the new longsword up in a two-handed grip. The thunder-grey blade drinks the arcane light, its strange, internal veins of silver seeming to pulse with a cold, hungry light. He remembers his own words. *It is a dirge.* He swings.

The blade does not clang or ring. It sings a low, mournful note as it cuts the air, a chord of finality and ruin. The wight moves to parry, its own blade a blur of sickly green, but the thunder-grey steel is not entirely there, its edge slipping through the space between moments. It meets the wight's neck. The star-dusted darkness that now infests the steel devours the creature's animating magic in a silent, violet flash. The wight's head comes free, tumbling to the stone with a dry clatter. Its body, suddenly just a collection of ancient bones in rotting finery, collapses in on itself, a puppet with its strings cut. Ferol Sal is gone, his ancient evil unmade.

Kragor watches the robed skeleton fall, then shifts his gaze, and the sickly violet aura of his hex leaps from the empty space to cling to the nearest suit of armor.

The fight is not over. Scarlet's owl streaks past the remaining armor, a ghostly distraction, then banks and spits a small glob of flame that spatters against its iron helm. Whisper, woozy and disoriented, spins to her feet and lashes out at the armor, but her claws find only air. She snarls, then wisely disengages, melting back down the hall to safety.

"On the metal ones!" Gerhard shouts, his mark shifting to the second suit of armor as his bow sings again, his arrow sparking off its chest plate. Halite, abandoning his thrown weapon to the gloom, rips another trident from the harness on his back and hews at the same target, a solid blow that leaves a deep score in the metal.

The first suit of armor swings at Halite. It is a crushing blow that should have shattered his ribs. But the goliath grits his teeth, his skin momentarily taking on the hardness of granite. The blow lands with a dull thud, its force entirely negated. The second armor misses him twice, its fists hammering the stone wall beside his head.

Doctor Pepe, peeking from his doorway, looses a crossbow bolt that ricochets harmlessly away. Elara is more fortunate; her arrow bites deep into a joint in the second armor's arm.

Kragor steps into the fray, his new longsword a blur of grey death. He brings it down on the first armor. The dirge-song of the blade rings out as it smashes into the construct's shoulder. Plates of enchanted iron buckle and split, and the thing staggers, its animating light flickering like a faulty lamp, wounded but not yet dead.

Scarlet's flame goes wide, painting the stone wall with a brief, angry light. Whisper throws a javelin that glances off its shoulder. Gerhard's arrow skips off the armor's helm with a shriek of metal. But Halite, finding his rhythm, drives his trident deep into its chest. There is a grinding crunch, a final shudder, and the construct collapses into a heap of scrap.

The last armor stands alone, turning its helmeted head from Halite to Kragor. It

lumbers toward the orc, its iron fists raised. Its first blow is a ponderous, telegraphed swing that Kragor parries with a jarring clash of steel. As it raises its arms for a second, crushing blow, Elara's arrow sinks into the joint of its knee, making it stumble. Doctor Pepe's fires his crossbow. The bolt, a splinter of wood and iron guided by a hand that has forgotten its own sureness, flies not true but wide. It sparks against the corridor wall then is swallowed by the gloom.

It is Kragor who ends it. Another swing of the thunder-grey blade, a final, sorrowful note hanging in the air. The longsword cleaves the armor from shoulder to hip. The construct falls apart, two halves of dead, useless iron that crash to the floor with a deafening, final clang.

The final, deafening clang of sundered iron fades. Silence rushes in to fill the void, thick and heavy as grave dust. It is a silence broken only by the harsh, ragged gulps of air from lungs that have earned every breath.

Kragor steps over the cloven ruin of the last armor, the dirge-blade in his hand humming with a low, satisfied thrum. He prods the heap of bone and rotting silk that was Ferol Sal with the toe of his boot. He kneels. His scarred green fingers, with a delicacy born of a hundred dissections on the battlefield, probe the brittle, web-like fabric of the wight's robes. He finds them nestled in a secret fold over the skeleton's ribs: two small keys of blackened brass, their shapes ornate and unfamiliar. They are cold as a corpse's kiss in his palm.

He and Gerhard move deeper into the laboratory, a place of foul stinks and fouler science. Against the walls, barrels bound in verdigris-eaten iron stand sentinel. Their contents bubble with a slow, greasy *plop...* *plop...*, releasing a sharp, vinegary reek that stings the throat and waters the eyes. What dormant plagues or transformative poisons simmer in that viscous broth, they do not care to learn.

The workbenches are a tangled nest of glass piping, copper coils, and simmering retorts.

Within the glass, liquids of bilious yellow and bruised purple drip and steam. This is the wight's kitchen, the very crucible where the Frigid Woe was cooked. To jostle a table, to crack a single vial, would be to invite a death more horrifying than any blade. They move with the predatory stillness of cats stalking through a room of sleeping cobras. They manage to liberate a fine set of alchemist's tools from one tray, their fingers trembling. A second, simpler set they find on a high shelf, gathering dust, and claim that as well.

But the search is otherwise a hollow one. There is no great ledger detailing the wight's work. No flask labeled with the simple, miraculous word: *Cure*. They have decapitated the serpent, but its venom still courses through the veins of their friends.

Exhausted, they retreat to the golem's butcher-shop, a council of the walking wounded. The two brass keys are a heavy weight in Kragor's pouch, a question cast in metal. Before them lies a locked room of scuttling sea-horrors and the cold, sinking heart of the vault. The cure is still down here, somewhere, waiting in the dark.