

She knelt before the altar, fully clad in the ceremonial plate armor that had not seen use in centuries, though its joints had remained well-oiled under the steadfast care the priests. The metal cut into her knees, the armor poorly fitted to her form, as she rested against the cold stone of the floor, head bent in supplication to her Goddess: Mielikki, Mother of Nature, Queen of the Wild, Shepherdess of the Lost. The smell of incense, thick and rich, still hung in the air, wafting along unseen currents that caressed her cheeks, bringing a sense of comfort and familiarity she had almost forgotten existed.

She drew a deep breath and retreated within herself to a place of peace, listening with unwavering resolve to the world around her. The halls, once filled with the hymns of the faithful and the fervent chants of devoted supplicants, now lay in utter silence, as if the temple itself had been consumed by some unseen shadow. The panes of stained glass which lined the arches of the cathedral lay in utter darkness, their images lost to the shadows which hung in the rafters like a murder of crows.

*A deep *THUD* shattered the silence around her, as the solid oak door of the entryway shook with an unnatural force.*

She closed her eyes tightly, as if she could dull her senses to the world, and in doing so wish away the evils just outside the door. She had not imagined the prophecy would come to fruition during her lifetime, and she certainly had not imagined she would be left to face them alone.

Despite her years of training, preparing for this war, she quaked with an unspoken fear: a feeling that she was not enough, that she could not stand against the horde, that her faith would falter, or worse- that her Goddess had abandoned her and the rest of the world to suffer in this wave of eternal darkness. She wrapped her fingers tightly around the worn leather grip of her longsword, knuckles white with tension, her hands shaking almost imperceptibly.

*Again, a *THUD* as a body was thrown against the door. The hinges groaned with a sound of despair, as if they knew their fate. After a moment of silence, another *THUD*, then another, and another. An echoing chorus of crashes grew into a cacophony, as the door bowed beneath the assault. It would not hold much longer.*

But she could not allow her masters- her friends- to have died in vain. This sanctuary, the last to stand against the undead hordes, must not fall. If she were to fail, it would mark the end of the last outpost, the only barrier between the droves of undead and the innocents in the valley below. She imagined the swarms of zombies, the necrotic remains of her sisters and brothers, flooding through the streets of the valley like an unstoppable wave of death, crashing through the houses and devouring the souls of the living. The families. The elderly. The children.

She would not allow it. She took a final breath to steel her resolve and rose slowly to her feet, turning slowly to face the entrance of the temple.

With a final, desperate howl, the door gave way, crashing to the floor as splinters shattered across the empty pews. There they stood: a horde of grey bodies, their flesh dripping from their gnarled bones like melted wax, eyes bleached white and cracking unnaturally with jet black fissures, their fingers cured and malformed, as if their bones had been shattered and reformed into dagger-sharp sickles.

The seconds stretched onwards, with neither side advancing, when she began to hear a shuffling sound from within the throng, which began to slowly part, as a single figure advanced to the front. A foul

creature, his beautiful features marred by undeath, drew to the front and stared at her with a longing gaze, his lips curling into a snarl that bared his rotting fangs. With a shudder, she recognized her old Master, lost to the beast of death, standing before her, his veins bursting with a viscous black sludge, his scalp peeling to the side, exposing the sallow bone below.

She muttered a final prayer to her Goddess, a desperate hope travelling to likely deaf ears, and stepped forward, brandishing her sword in hand. With a cold resolve spreading through her body, she charged towards the horde.

As she rushed forward, merely a few steps from their ranks, she felt a warmth touch her hand and begin to slowly ripple along her skin and up her arms. It felt like dappled sunshine leaking through the treetops on a summer day, or the final rays of a setting sun laying across a field of wheat, gently swaying in the breeze. Her eyes began to glisten with tears, as she realized, even in the face of certain death, her Goddess was still beside her.

As the sword began to glow in her hands, the radiant light illuminated the faces of the horde as they shrank back in fear, her master wincing in the holy light that bathed his wretched remains. Perhaps- just perhaps- she may yet survive, so that this holy sanctuary may remain a beacon of light for those lost in the darkness of the coming days.