

The young elf closed her eyes and listened. There it was, among the whispering of the maples and dogwoods, a low, mournful sound. The scout made this circuit around the hidden village on most days, and on most days, as she looked for signs of incursion by the detested orcs, she might have paused here for another reason. She might have pinched a bit of sassafras bark for tea later or just stood still, allowing the delicious fragrances of pine and oak and peat and chestnut to overwhelm her senses. But not today.

No, today there are no moments of respite in this sacred grove. Today the white of the tiny blossoms in the grass is matched by the flowing white gowns of the mourners. Today the queen is dead, murdered by orc scum. Tomorrow the orcs would pay for their crime, but today, today is for gatherings of prayers and words of comfort, for remembrances and embraces.

The flower-strewn bed passed her on its way to the clearing where their tribe had buried its queens and kings for millennia, and as it passed, she tossed her own softly scented remembrance onto it. Honeysuckle, the queen's favorite, wafted up and left a lingering reminder of the queen's goodness in her wake.

The scout fell in with the processional as it reached the place of interment, a fairy ring shielded from the rest of the world by forsythia and rhododendron and littered with wildflowers in every color. Evergreens and cedars a thousand years old stood vigil over this place and its inhabitants, and the divine could be felt everywhere.

Silently, the throng came to a halt, and elves crowded around the death bed to catch on last glimpse of their beloved ruler. The scout instead hung back, instinctively alert for signs of ambush. No orcs would ruin this day. She could barely hear the priest beginning to offer the final blessing and then stopped as a sudden rush of wind set the trees alive with sound. Tensing, she had been to enough funerals to know something was not right.

She scanned the crowd. They were murmuring, and that was replaced by a cheer, spreading outward from the center of the mass. The sudden wind now reached her, and she finally understood. In the wind were the words, "I am not finished with you yet."

The queen was sitting, herself a little confused, and now she was being helped to her feet. The masses were rejoicing and cheering and crying. The cause was not lost. The beloved was not gone. The scout closed her eyes again and felt a single tear make its way down her own cheek. The queen is dead. Long live the queen.