

April 3

Wisteria and I hardly spoke on the way to the Summer Court. At least Sorrel will argue with me when they're upset—Wisteria just turns silent. But our arrival was greeted by an enormous reception: members of the Summer Court eager to congratulate me on my future coronation, cheering and playing music, calling me, already, "Queen Iris." Flattering of course, but I confess I was a little overwhelmed. Can I ever live up to all this? It seemed that every fae of the Court was there—Mayfly, Amaryllis, Juniper, Finch, more than I can hope to name—some with legitimate congratulations and a few, I think, hoping to ingratiate themselves to royalty, but most simply there for a party. Finch, after a few cups of nectar, spent over half an hour telling me how close a friend and confidant he had been to Queen Opal, boasting that he even knew a few sayings in the royal language and insisting that I write them down. I don't know how useful they'll be, but here they are:

The song is the winter and the summer: pai tom zhamanehen tom sazh plu tom fizhef.

The person forges the sword: akreshen tom fei tom iklag.

The queen was the ruler: sapu tom ayafei tom ayishalan.

By the time I was able to slip away Wisteria had gone off on some errand, no one seemed to know what, I suppose it wanted to avoid me, so I took a walk to the Sending Tree to see if any mail had arrived for me. I dreaded finding a long, detailed letter from Sorrel continuing our argument, but found myself disappointed when there wasn't one. Likewise when I returned to my quarters and Wisteria hadn't come back.

The beauty of the Summer Court is always a great consolation to me: the light here never reaches full day or night but spans a sunset spectrum of purples, oranges, and pinks; a light mist hangs always over the rivers, and the soft rains that sometimes fall glitter gold in the slanting sunlight. Every plant from the tallest magnolia to the smallest clover blossoms, and the foxglove flower that the Court has taken as its emblem is everywhere

in abundance. The air is sweet with the perfumes and incense the fae here adore. And always there is music—birdsong and frogs of course, and wherever fae of the Summer Court gather at least one of them seems to have pan pipes or a lyre, and almost all will sing. I can hear quite a group of them playing and dancing in the gardens now. It reminds me of my first summer here, when Violet's string ensemble played for that wonderful ball, and Wisteria and I danced for hours, hand in hand, how we laughed together until our sides ached, how she sparkled, always, turned every head in the room with her charm, and how she lit up every time I said "I love you," and how beautiful she always made me feel, and it all felt—well, it felt like a fairy tale.



How long has passed since then..?

I think I'll retire to rest early. It was a long journey, and I'm tired.

April 4

Have just had a conversation with Juniper I must write down before I forget.

I went out to the garden hoping for a little quiet, and they were there weeding a fairie circle. When I knelt to work beside him he gave me a nod in greeting, but we weeded the garden in our accustomed companionable silence—after so many summers at their elbow I no longer need to be told which plants to pull and how.

Then he broke the silence to ask me why I had been crying. I thought I was hiding my distress so well, but yes, I have been crying lately, and I suppose it showed. It was as though a dam burst and I told them everything about the row with Sorrel and Wisteria, all in such an emotional jumble it's a wonder if he understood any of it at all, and soon I was saying things I didn't even realise I'd been worried about—that my loves expected such wonders from me and now they'd realise what a dull fool I was, that I would lose them and lose the world I was beginning to make my

home, that our love had only been a passing whim, too weak to last, a fairy tale. And now it was over.

They handed me a handkerchief, for I had begun to cry again, and they said, now, love is not a fairy tale and it doesn't simply end.

I said if that was true maybe I didn't know what love was at all. The way he looked at me then made me think I was missing something obvious again.



This is what love is, he said, and pointed at his garden. You need good dirt and sunshine, but when the rain doesn't come you water it, when it is too weak to stand you give it a trellis, when it chokes you prune its branches, and every day, you just have to get your hands dirty and pull up the weeds. Now sometimes the soil is lacking, or the climate is wrong, and you need to give it up. But I think you have good soil, Iris.

I think so too.

I love Wisteria and Sorrel, and I'm determined to do the work it takes to make our garden grow. Wisteria is off on an errand now, but when it comes back we'll talk about what happened. I need to explain how I feel, and I need to apologise, and this will be hard, but it will be worth it. She is so precious to me. And I must write to Sorrel straight away.

When a queen wishes to speak very highly of someone without embarrassing them, there is a modest saying they use—*nazhonashonit tom fei tom yelar*: The person did not dishonour the Court. I've heard Queen Camellia say this of Wisteria, and of Sorrel, and it warms my heart to recall how each of them beamed to hear it. If I really do become Queen, I must say it of Juniper.

I hope someday I can earn such honour for myself, too.

April 6

I entirely forgot to write in this journal yesterday-oh, but what a day it was! True summer at last and I am a cup overflowing. Where can I begin?

I had just mailed my letter to Sorrel when I was told of Wisteria's return to the Court, and I hurried to meet it at the gates, steeling myself to apologise-but before I could say a word Wisteria took my hand in both of its and apologised to me. She berated herself for impatience and insensitivity, and said she understood the pressure I was under, how such an honour as the Crown would be a burden too. Its own high position within the Summer Court had often caused it the same distress. I felt such a cloud lift from me as she articulated so clearly the tangle in my heart-how well she knows me! My own apology seemed so inelegant in comparison, but she didn't mind. Wisteria said too that it wanted to make up for that disastrous trip during the Equinox Festival, and it had a surprise for me: we were going to a ball in the mortal world. Her errands the past few days had been to seek out a suitable human establishment, to retrieve a splendid new dress for me from the court tailors, and to commission Violet's string quartet to accompany us and play for the ball. All had been arranged for us to sneak into the assembly in the guise of ordinary mortals. I had my misgivings, yes, but it promised me it would treat the mortals with the utmost respect. She was true to her word.

We danced all through the night among humans, and Wisteria was perfectly polite and charming. And to watch her dance is always a great pleasure. Yet, among other mortals again, I found them... changed. Their manners and fashion were new, their conversation opaque, their voices strange to me as the calls of birds once were-the world has moved on while I have been away. I think my son is a grown man by now. And I must have changed too, for that thought no longer grieves me.

Wisteria and I lingered by the door, hand in hand, watching the mortals dance; I felt as though I were watching deer in a field. Beautiful, and



strangers to me. Did I ever belong to this world? I intimated to Wisteria that I was ready to leave.

The remainder of the night we passed in a nearby botanical garden, talking and laughing just as we always had, and we raced each other to a willow and I would have won, too, if Wisteria hadn't caught my trailing skirt to pull me back and get ahead—and we both fell to the dewy grass in a tangle laughing uncontrollably. The earliest light of dawn found us there, and as we caught our breath Wisteria watched the sunrise spill out its colours with delight in her eyes, and I watched her.



What do I mean when I say Wisteria is beautiful? I speak not just of its physical appearance, though I appreciate that dearly, I mean the grace with which it moves, I mean the way it views the world with such joy. Sometimes I think the Queens made the Royal Tongue because no human language was sufficient for the beauty of their world.

This beauty is the sun's quality: *pai tol fenei tom lemizhef anedri*.

As the sunlight opened up the flowers of the garden, Wisteria plucked a blue iris—the flower whose name I chose and my favourite colour too—and braided it into my hair with deft fingers, telling me all the while how lovely I was, teasing and tickling my neck... we were interrupted when a scandalised groundskeeper came upon us, and before he could question us we dashed away laughing into the trees, slipped back into Faerie.

This afternoon we made our leisurely way back to the Summer Court—where we found Juniper all in a huff, for it seems Queen Camellia called yesterday while we were out! And neither the leader of the Summer Court nor the Heir to the Throne were anywhere to be found, half the court had gone dancing with us, and Juniper was the only fae of any rank there to welcome the Queen and he was fresh from the garden and fairly covered with mud—at this point in his complaint I could no longer keep from laughing at the image, and that set Wisteria laughing too, and I think that seeing us so happy together mollified Juniper a little, for they couldn't quite hide a smile.



Camellia is not one to stand on ceremony, and I doubt she's as offended by our behaviour as he is embarrassed on our behalf. Nonetheless, I'm a little nervous to speak with her again—the deference the Summer Court shows to her, even more elaborately than the fae of the Winter Court, reminds me what an honour it is to be in her presence. But she always treats me as her guest. I think about our meeting and words in the Royal Tongue echo in my mind.

azhonashiyān tol ayāfei irem: This queen will honour me.

April 7

Queen Camellia always looked so perfectly at ease in the Winter Court, as though she was born for frost and pine and a hot cup of tea. I couldn't have imagined her in summer. Yet today, she looked just as at home amid the flowers and sunshine of the Summer Court—the tea we shared was iced, this time, but otherwise it was much the same as when she visited me in the winter. She looked at me like she was looking into my heart, and asked me earnestly how I felt about my upcoming coronation. I had to admit I've been nervous about my ability to rule, for it seems such a lot of responsibility and I have had such



responsibilities in the past, which I have not fulfilled. And she has set a high standard for her successor.

She nodded, and said she would have worried if I hadn't been nervous, for it showed that I took my role seriously and that I cared for the fae who I was to rule. She too had been anxious about her coronation, and she assured me it was quite natural. This was of course very gratifying to hear, but did little to assuage my fears. It is daunting to take on such responsibility alone.

Camellia asked me then if I remembered what the word for "queen" in the Royal Tongue actually meant, and I said of course, it was a combination of the words for "crown" and "person"—the one who wears the crown. She said yes, and no. Try, the one who is the crown.

The queen is the jewel of the fae, the emblem of their greatness, the best they have to offer. That is why it is a serious responsibility, yes, but it also means that I am not alone, for my strength as Queen will consist of that of both courts, all of us, together.

The most important qualification of a Queen is love for the fae. I think of Wisteria and Sorrel and watering my garden, but not just them: I remember trading riddles with fae of the Winter Court, dancing with those of the Summer Court, the wild parade of all of them together in the Equinox Festivals, I remember standing in the soft gloaming light of my garden a lifetime ago and looking up to see a fairy for the first time. I remember the wonder that shot like lightning through my heart. Yes, I love the fae. I always shall.

"I am the queen, and I will rule." For the first time I feel ready to say that when the time comes to initiate my coronation. Queen Camellia has told me only a little of what happens after that—there will be certain trials I must undertake to prove my worth, after the riddling manner of fae tradition, before I can touch the relics of the Queen. By the time I reach that point, I think I can be ready. So long as I know I have my loves supporting me.

Seeing my confidence somewhat restored, Camellia suggested that we move on to practising with the Royal Tongue. Some of my notes-

I will not craft a necklace before the celebration: *ikrishayit rem o kaklu ipra tom yenyamin.*

The fire is in the forest: *pai tom kagol se tom yitlekak.*

The sword was forged by the person: *sapu akreshenti tom klaga am tom ifei.*

Wisteria kindly checked the Sending Tree for me, but still no letter from Sorrel.



April 12

I must practice with the Royal Tongue, and Wisteria has a painting it's working on, so as I write this we are together in the courtyard, she at her easel and me with my books at the table. It's such a treat to watch Wisteria paint: its intense focus and bright eyes, its inspiration like fire- but I must focus on my work, for now. I've been thinking about the responsibilities of a queen, and about love, and about the way the forest works as one around me.

The bird rules the trees: *ayishen tom mirmir tom yitlepeyim.*

The tree ruled the forest: *ayishone tom itlepe tom yitlekak.*

The queen rules the people, who rule the birds: *ayishen tom ayafei tom ifeyim, inis ayishen tom imirmirim.*

I will tend the birds, who rule the trees: peyashiyān rem tom imirmirim, inis
ayishen tom yitlepeyim.

I will tend the birds and the forest's trees: peyashiyān rem tom imirmirim
plu tom yitlepeyim anitlekak.

Addendum—have just received a letter from Sorrell!

Sorrell's Letter:

My Dearest Iris,

I owe you my most profound apologies. I acted quite thoughtlessly last winter; I was so eager to impress you by playing tricks on humans that I failed to consider how repulsive such jokes would be to your compassionate soul. I so often forget that you are human and that mortals remain close to your heart. I forget too that they are not all as witty and good-natured as you. I cannot promise to entirely abstain from such trickery, any more than I could promise not to breathe, but I will do my best to ensure that my jests are such that all may laugh at. I quite understand why you lost your temper at the Equinox Festival now, and you had every right to be upset.

I hadn't realized how keenly you felt the pressure of the crown. Of course, I think your nerves are quite unjustified since you are perfectly suited to be queen, and I know you will be a wise and splendid ruler. But I also know too much of your modesty to imagine I can convince you, so I have been scouring the Library of the Winter Court for something that might ease your nerves. Once you know more about the coronation, I suspect it will seem less intimidating. I have found this passage that describes preparation for a coronation, quite positively it seems — it comes from an attendant of the queen two queens past.

"Never was I more sure that Opal was meant to be queen than when she first donned the regal necklace. She stood before the assembled face of both Courts and spoke words of power in the Royal Tongue. I am told they meant, 'I am queen, and I will rule. This necklace was forged in the sun's fire. With it, I will not dishonour the queens who ruled before me.' At once she took up the trial and proved her worth — when she drew the necklace from its enchanted box all fell silent, awed by its sparkling beauty in the evening sunlight. Unphased by the treasure in her hands, Opal placed the necklace around her neck. She wore it with full confidence in her right to it, her chin held high. She wore it with the grace of a true queen."

But of course, you will be twice as graceful as any past queen.

Here is another passage I found, in the Royal Tongue. Perhaps you should translate it? I should be delighted to see how your studies are coming along.

"ikrishiyan rem o ya'ya. I will craft a crown.
epiya ki om aya gya. It will be a great crown.
oto ifrupeyim, ikrishiyan rem iki. With flowers, I will craft it.
rankoshiyan tom aya oto tom ifeya nalutri. The crown will sparkle
pai tol rayon tom kemizhef nalutri." with the moon's grace.
This wisdom is the moon's quality.

I wish I could tell you more about the coronation process, but alas, much of the preparation is shrouded in secrecy even to Wisteria and myself. You will have to rely on Camellia's instruction. But whatever happens, I know you will do wonderfully.

And it feels frivolous to add this, but: should you choose not to accept the crown, you will still always have a place with us. We will always love you.

Give Wisteria my love, and tell her I shall write to both of you at greater length soon. In the meantime I remain,

Forever Yours,

Sorrel
of the Winter Court



May 1

I was going to spend this morning studying, honestly I was, but then Wisteria gave me those eyes and said it had found a lovely place for a walk down by the creek, where the lilac groves bloomed and there were always ducks on the water, and it really wasn't healthy for me to spend so much time hunched over a book, and wasn't I due for a break?



It was every bit the lovely walk Wisteria promised it would be. Once, in breathless silence, we watched a great blue heron take off from the creek and glide up over the trees, a perfect silhouette against the pink painted sky. By the time we reached the water the day was warm enough that a dip in the cool creek sounded quite refreshing, so I left my shoes and notebook on the bank and we waded in up to our ankles, giggling at the cold current rushing over our feet. And, wicked me, I scooped a little water up in my hands, and beckoned to her like I'd found something until she came to peer into the hollow of my hands—and then I splashed it into her face. In the brief moment before it started splashing water back at me, the expression of perfect surprise on its face was adorable. In a few minutes we were both soaked through and laughing uncontrollably.

We've come up to the flat rocks overlooking the creek to dry off in the sunshine, and Wisteria is asleep beside me, its arm around my waist. The fae don't need to sleep—Sorrel never does or at least won't admit to it, but Wisteria likes to sometimes, and she has told me she can only fall asleep when she is perfectly, blissfully at ease. I scarcely ever feel the need to sleep myself, now, and this beautiful sight I wish to be awake for. Well, I suppose I'll study a little after all, while I have paper and pen at hand. I will watch the creatures of the forest and let them inspire me.

The bird eats the fish: kashen tom mirmir tom isulyi.

The fish is eaten by the bird: pai kashenti tom sulyi am tom imirmir.

The trees are a forest: pai tom itlepeyim om itlekak.

The flower is the seed's legacy: pai tom frupe tom yeklo napelin.

The forest is the queen's garden: pai tom itlekak tom peyashon anayafei.