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The Queen in the Hill
by Kage Baker

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I will tell you about Maeve.

Me, you wouldn't be interested in, for there is nothing extraordinary about my life. My mother had been shamed, was about to drown herself in the Loire when one of the immortal Lords spotted her and offered her his protection. This was just before Justinian became Emperor of Byzantium, I think, in the time the mortal men reckoned the sixth century after the birth of Christ.

But my mother's savior was about the usual business of the immortals who work for their Company, which is to walk among mortals and preserve fine and rare things that would otherwise be destroyed by them. The Lords and Ladies do this, as I understand, because there will come a day in the distant future when men will need the things they have wasted: beasts and plants that have become extinct, forgotten knowledge from ancient texts. In that hour the Company will be able to open its strongholds and come to Mankind's rescue, showering down its harvest of their treasures. Who could find fault with such benign masters? Especially as their mercy does not extend to things alone; they save people, too.

Anyway the mortal girl came with the Lord to this mountain, to this ancient stronghold that the immortals call Eurobase One: and some weeks later she died giving birth to me, for she was not strong.

I was strong, but I was not perfect as a child must be perfect to be given eternal life. They were very kind to me anyway, the immortal Lords and Ladies. I've never lacked anything, never gone hungry a day in my life! I was lucky that I could live with them, and not with the ignorant savages in the mortal world down the mountain.

And they gave some thought to my future, too: I was apprenticed to old Claude, who was an artist, a genius, master of gardens without peer. The Lords and Ladies themselves said it was a thousand pities he couldn't be made immortal, but mortal and aging he was. So I was given to him, to climb the high ladders and prune where he directed, and to kneel for hours on the cold earth, planting out hyacinth

bulbs where he pointed with his stick. He taught me his art. I was very grateful.

But I don't know where Maeve came from.

I was sixteen when I saw her first, the little creature with the hair like moonlight. She had got into the pergola somehow, though the gate was locked, and she had tugged her feeble brother after her. They were in there making a mess of the pomegranates, pulling them from the espaliers, bowling them around and breaking them open, scattering the red beads without even tasting them. It was their tiny crazy laughter that called us.

Old Claude was so angry with them, he lost all sense; for he was especially proud of those trees. He advanced on them howling curses, waving his stick. The children stopped, staring at him, but they did not run as sensible children would. The boy cowered and sank down, hiding his face, covering his big blind-looking eyes. The girl remained on her feet. She looked at Claude with no fear at all, though his stick was whistling in the air and his eyes were starting out of his head in wrath.

He kept coming, and when I saw that she would not move I ran to put myself between them. I crouched over her and Claude's stick came whistling down on my back. That only made him more angry, and he beat me with all the strength of his old arm. I didn't mind; I have a strong back. I said, "Master, the little girl is mad! She didn't know it was wrong!"

I was mistaken to think this would make him stop belaboring me, because he got in three more good blows before we heard one of the Lords laughing.

"Stop! Stop, if you please, worthy Master Claude!" he called, striding down the walk toward us.

It was the Lord Aegeus, still chuckling as he surveyed the ruin all about us, the broken branches, broken fruit. The child ran to him and buried her face in his cloak, and he swept her up in his arms, where she looked at us disdainfully.

I knelt at once, but Claude remained on his feet. He took liberties; the Lords and Ladies allowed it because he was an artist. His back was stiff with his anger. His jowls were flushed red with it. He clasped his shaking hands on the knob of his stick and stared at Lord Aegeus in silence, so that the Lord had to speak first.

"Worthy Master, my apologies," said the Lord, smiling. He knit his brows at the little girl, pretending to be stern with her. He said, "Naughty Maeve! Look what you've done now! Did _you_ spoil this pretty garden?"

And she said, "Oh, no!" though her tiny hands were pink with the juice, and that was the only color to her skin anywhere. She looked like a ghost, she was so white.

Claude made a sharp noise in his throat. I looked over at the little boy, who was still trembling where he lay.

The Lord said, "You didn't? Who was it, then?" And she pointed her finger at the boy and said, "It was Fallon!"

The Lord looked as though he wanted to laugh afresh, but he bit his lips and then he said: "Now, you know that's not true. Poor Fallon doesn't do things unless you tell him to do them. You're the one always getting into mischief, little fairy! I want you to apologize to our dear Master Claude for all this mess."

She dimpled and said, "No!" and Claude shouted: "Most divine Lord, never in seventy-five years of faithful service have I seen such wanton vandalism!" and Lord Aegeus looked at him rather coldly as he said: "Sadly true, Master, for everyone knows the young people of today have no respect for their elders. I can assure you that this child will not misbehave here again, however. Calm yourself! Your boy will

clean everything up." And his gaze turned to me and he said, "Rise, boy. And, please, accept my thanks for moving so quickly! My poor cherubs would have broken like eggshell if your Master had actually landed a blow."

I rose awkwardly and ducked my head in acknowledgment of the Lord's thanks. I wondered, how could they be his children? The Lords and Ladies do not beget their own kind, I knew that. They take mortal children and give them immortal life, if the children are sufficiently perfect. But the girl and boy did not look like any mortal children I had ever seen. They were so little and pale, and their eyes were so big.

Anyway Lord Aegeus carried them away, and I cleaned up the mess they'd made.

I saw her sometimes now and then, over the next few years. Sometimes the boy would be with her, though less and less as time went on. There were rumors that he was a genius of some kind, but he never looked well.

She grew up very quickly, and not in the way of being tall, if you know what I mean; she looked like a woman within a few years, with high little breasts filling out the bodice of her gown. She would wade through the beds of annuals picking big bunches of flowers, which drove Claude to distraction, but now that he was aware she was a special favorite of Lord Aegeus he knew better than to complain.

Maybe it was keeping his anger to himself that did for him at last, because he had a stroke when I was twenty. After that I was Head Gardener, and won the title of Master when I devised the three-level topiary walk for the north slope.

The Lords and Ladies were enchanted with it. They love beautiful things, and they respect artists. Master Simeon by the age of twenty-two! I had all I could ask for in life.

And then I was given more.

When I was summoned to Lord Aegeus' study, I thought he had some request to make relative to my art, maybe for a new kind of rose or rare fruit. They like such things, the Lords and Ladies. Lord Aegeus was seated by the fire in his study, and across from him in another chair sat his assistant, the Lord Victor. Lord Victor was young as immortals go, not really much older than me, and he looked younger already.

Well, they waved me to a third chair; and I sat hesitantly and another mortal stepped forward and poured wine for me, the same wine the Lords themselves were drinking. I thought to myself, _This is what it is to be an artist!_ and I bowed respectfully over my cup and said, "Thank you, divine Lord."

Lord Aegeus said, "Oh, you're quite welcome," with a wave of dismissal. He was staring at me in an assessing kind of way, and so was the other Lord. I kept a humble silence, as Claude had kept his insolent silences, and it worked: Lord Aegeus cleared his throat and said at last, "Well! You've certainly grown into a sturdy fellow since that day in the pergola! You were only Master Claude's boy then. And you're the Master yourself now, are you not? What's your name?"

I told him it was Simeon and he laughed out loud, and the Lord Victor smiled thinly. Lord Aegeus said: "Simeon! That's appropriate, I must say! Up in the treetops all the time, and as hairy as a monkey too! But come, don't take offense. All your tests show you're a supremely healthy young simian, and quite a bright one at that."

I murmured my thanks for the compliment. Lord Aegeus said, "Quite," and had a sip of his wine. Then he said, "You've had a few sexual encounters, but you don't seem to have formed any long-term relationships. In light of that, we would like to make you a proposition."

I didn't know what to think. He burst out laughing at the look on my face and Lord Victor turned red.

"No, no no!" said Lord Aegeus. "It's only this, good Master Simeon: my dearest Maeve must have a mate, and we've chosen you for the honor!"

I just said "Oh," feeling as though I had been struck over the head. He went on: "It should have been Fallon, but he passed away, poor creature. Pity. Still, we learned a lot from him; and dear Maeve is wonderfully vigorous! We have great hopes of her. Now, you needn't be nervous! She may look like a child, but I can personally attest that you won't have to teach her a thing!" He grinned broadly and Lord Victor stared down at the floor.

I had a gulp of wine and nerved myself to ask him, "But -- if she's your favorite, divine Lord -- won't you mind?"

"Mind? Good heavens, no. She's a charming girl, but she is a mortal, as you are. She certainly can't bear me children! I'll admit I'll miss our golden afternoons, but the plain fact is she ought to be bred while she's in her prime." He said the last leaning forward, holding my gaze in a matter-of-fact way.

I said, "I didn't think she was mortal, exactly," and he said: "All too mortal, I regret to say! And human enough for you. But we need very much to see if we can produce something more human still, and so -- wedding bells for Maeve."

For a moment nobody said anything, and then Lord Victor cleared his throat.

He said to me, "Does this offend you?" And I said, "Oh, no, divine Lord," and Lord Aegeus said, "Of course he isn't offended! Good sensible solid fellow that he is. Besides, you're rather a romantic choice, I think. You were her knight-errant, once upon a time in the pergola. Yes, throwing yourself between my baby darling and the wrath of Claude! Oh, that's good, wrath of Claude!" Lord Aegeus turned laughing to the other Lord, who didn't seem to think much of the joke.

I was thinking about Maeve with her tiny perfect face, with her moonlight hair, with her big liquid eyes and silvery laugh. I thought about the bodice of her gown. I told myself that it really would be a great honor, to be awarded such a wife. I said, "But will she love me?" and the Lord Aegeus assured me, "She can be quite affectionate, my friend. You'll treat her well, of course -- she has never been treated otherwise -- and really she doesn't require much! Flattery, presents, a sense of Romance. In addition to the obvious physical attentions," and he almost leered as he said it. That was a disconcerting thing, seeing a divine Lord with such an expression. They look so wise and noble as a rule.

But I agreed to take Maeve, because I did think she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I think I'd have agreed even if I'd known about the tests that followed, to be certain my sperm count and motility were all that was desired. They were painful and embarrassing tests, but I told myself it was no worse a thing than careful cross-pollination in an orchard or a greenhouse. And what rose or apple blossom was so fair as Maeve?

But she didn't love me.

She was in a furious sulk the day of our wedding. Still she was lovely, her pouting lips were sensual. Lord Aegeus gave her to me in the pergola, to make it the more romantic, as he said. He had her gowned all in white like a bride, and -- to give her a sense of ceremony -- placed my hand in hers. He even broke open a pomegranate and presented it to me to feed her, and at first she spat out the bright seeds without even tasting them, fierce; but he spoke to her sternly and she obeyed at last, and crunched them sullenly. They crimsoned her tiny mouth, made her more desirable still.

So it was done, and Lord Aegeus placed his hands on our two heads and said, "Be fruitful and multiply, my children!" Then he gave us a bottle of wine, a good vintage from the Lords' and Ladies' own cellars, and left me to manage the rest of it.

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I took her to my suite in the servants' quarters, hoping she would be impressed with how important her new husband was; but she thought nothing of all my rooms, or my bromeliads, or my drafting table, or any of my things. All she would say was, "Hairy Beast!" and flounce away from me. She made a game of it, answering Hairy Beast to anything I said to her: Would you like to bathe, wife? _Hairy Beast!_ Shall I light a fire, wife? _Hairy Beast!_ Shall I play the lute for you, wife? _Hairy Beast!_

But I still had the bottle of good wine, so I went into my kitchen and prepared a wedding supper: partridges in a sauce of shallots and cream, with fresh bread and white grapes. I set it out, poured the wine and seated myself; she came at once and clambered up into the chair opposite, trailing her bridal finery. Without a word she fell to, reaching into the dish and taking a whole partridge to eat with her hands.

Even in that she was graceful, tearing daintily with her little sharp teeth. I didn't get much of the food, watching her spellbound as I did. You wouldn't believe a girl could have such terrible manners and be so enchanting. She smeared partridge grease on the winecup when she drank, sucked the bones loudly, greedily tore the soft center from the loaf, even blew her tiny nose in her napkin; but it was all beauty and refinement in my eyes. Beautiful people can do such things, and still be loved.

I drank more of the wine than she did, and it made me bold. When the partridges were all gone and Maeve was idly rolling grapes around on the table, I said: "What about that bath now, wife?" And she mocked me, she said, "What about that ba-ath now, wife? I don't want to bathe with you. You're ugly and hairy and old."

I told her I wasn't so old, that I was much younger than Lord Aegeus, and she stared with a blank face; then she shrugged so beautifully and said, "But you _look_ old." Her gaze wandered to the partridge bones in the dish and fixed on them, suddenly intense. Without looking up at me she said: "Make the bones come alive again!"

I told her I couldn't, and she said: "Yes you can! Just make them stand up in the dish and sing! Fallon could make them do that. Why can't you?"

I told her I wasn't as clever as Fallon. She raised scornful eyes to me.

"Can you make me a new gown without cutting any cloth?"

I told her No, and she said: "Fallon could! Can you make that stick in the fire grow green leaves again?"

I told her I couldn't, and she said: "Fallon could! He could make anything I told him to make, he was so clever. So why should I play with you, stupid thing?"

I set aside my winecup and I said, "Because Fallon is dead, and you're my wife."

She chewed her lower lip and sighed, she said: "My poor Fallon. I was supposed to be Queen in the Hill. He would have done everything for me. We'd have had lots of babies, and they'd have done everything for me too. Everybody would have brought me presents and played with me!" Tears welled in her eyes, perfect as diamonds. I reached out a hand to stroke her shoulder and she did not draw away. I said, "Don't cry, Maeve! I saw Fallon. He could never have made babies with you, wife. He was too sick."

"He could!" she insisted. "Fallon wasn't sick! He was just what I wanted him to be. Don't you remember?"

I said, "Remember what?" and she got a sly look in her eyes.

"Ha! You don't have the Memory. Big people don't remember things how they were, but we do. We

remember everything from the beginning of the world. Fallon did, and I do, but you can't. Big people think they're so clever, but they're not. We have always been more clever than you."

I said, "Who? You and Fallon?" and she shook her head and said, "Our kin!" as though I was just too stupid to waste time on. I said, "We'll make a new family," and she said, "I won't play with you! You don't have the Memory, and you can't make the bones stand up and sing!"

Forgive the plainness, but there was one bone at that table standing up and singing, and I got to my feet and said to her: "Lord Aegeus couldn't do those things either, but you've played with him. We're married, and you'll play with me now."

She stuck her lip out in anger. I wanted to bite it. She said, "_He_ gave me nice presents."

I said, "So will I. Have you ever seen blossom and apples on one bough? I can make those. I can make a rose as bright as your hair, without a single thorn. I could make a pleasure garden all the divine Lords and Ladies would want for themselves, but it would be yours alone. I can make marvels in the earth, nobody else has the skill to make such places! Even Lord Aegeus. You see?"

I don't know if she saw, crazy as she was, but she didn't fight when I picked her up and carried her away to the bath.

And that was strange, because when we were out of our clothes she was so like a baby I lost all desire. I could have washed her and toweled her as chastely as though I were caring for a child, then; but it seemed our nakedness had the opposite effect on Maeve. She had been capricious snow and ice; now she was a little licking tongue of fire. She laughed and laughed and scrambled all over me in the warm water. I couldn't hold back from her, no man could have, mortal or immortal.

And, I ask you: was it wrong? When she was my wife, and the divine Lords and Ladies themselves had ordered us to love?

Anyway she liked me very well after that, and let me take her to my bed, and I slept with her in my arms half-afraid I'd roll over and crush her, so little she was, a feather, a flame, a snowflake. My wife.

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Have you ever been in love like that? I don't think people were meant to live that way forever. How could they? They'd never get any work done. And how can you pay attention to anything but the beloved?

Maeve was a late sleeper, too. Though she walked fearless in sunlight, as dead Fallon had been unable to do, she much preferred the night for wakefulness and play: so of course I kept her favorite hours, though no Master Gardener should do that.

I had duties, and I ignored them. The divine Lords and Ladies (and, see, this is another example of their generosity) were gracious enough to overlook this fault. They even sent gifts to my quarters, rare wines, fine foods, jewels and gowns for my darling. She accepted the presents and was happy.

My hedges went untrimmed, and the annuals went to seed and weeds grew between the stones in the garden paths, but no bolt fell from heaven. Indeed, the Botanist Lord himself took time from his rare specimens to go out and oversee the work that had to be done before winter set in, bringing in all the potted citrus to the solarium, spreading out straw with his own noble hands!

When she and I weren't making love, or eating, or sleeping, I sat at my drafting table and plotted out the most beautiful garden in the world for Maeve. She loved to climb up beside me and watch as I worked out the proportions or rendered proposed views in colored chalk. I explained that it was a bower of night, to be at its best in the darkness, like my pretty wife.

She was impatient that it went so slowly. Fallon, I was assured, could have drawn up such plans in

an hour, and had the garden miraculously in place before nightfall of one day. That much was surely her fantasy! Fallon may have been a genius, but I know my own work; and no garden is made that way.

Once I asked Maeve where she and Fallon had come from, and she gave me that look as though I were really too stupid to be troubled with and said: "We were stolen."

But I never learned more about it, because she wouldn't say who had stolen the children, or from whom. Perhaps she didn't know.

When she would get bored with watching me she would want to do something else again, so we would, and I thought to myself that even dead Fallon couldn't have worked his miracles if he'd had to stop and do what I was doing every couple of hours. And it seemed to me a fine thing that I should have Maeve's bed and he should have his grave. He may have been a genius, but every time I had ever seen him he had been curling away from the sunlight like a blind worm. My little queen deserved a man, I thought. She'd have a much better life with me!

And, as anybody might have expected the way we were going at it, Maeve had lost her appetite for breakfast before the snows fell. By the time the first bitter storm came down on the Cevennes, there was no possible doubt she was carrying my child.

Now she had no desire for anything but presents, and she was so querulous I had a hard time of it bringing them quickly enough. Her favorite gifts were clothes; Lord Aegeus was kind enough to see that his tailoring staff came to us weekly for measurements and fittings. Warm robes in rich brocade, nightgowns of silk for Maeve's weary swollen body, slippers lined with fleece. When she ordered it I would set aside my work and brush her hair for hours, marveling at the glitter it had, like snow on a bright day. She would close her eyes and croon to herself in pleasure.

Once again I was caring for a child, who had to be coaxed to eat and to take the medicines the divine ones prescribed, who had to be comforted and sung to and held. I told her stories, I told her about how I'd begin her garden as soon as the snows were gone and what rare flowers I'd plant there. This was not conversation, you understand; she wasn't interested in talking; but I thought she liked the sound of my voice.

There was an early thaw that year, and word came from the Lords and Ladies that I ought to tend to my duties again. I protested that I must stay by my wife, for she needed constant care. By way of answer Lord Aegeus himself came and spoke softly to my little darling as I prepared our supper, and brought a sparkle to her dull eyes. He did me the honor of dining with us; and in the course of our meal suggested that Maeve ought to be moved to the Infirmary, as her condition was becoming precarious. There would be nurses to wait on her and I would be freed to prepare the gardens for spring.

I looked doubtfully at Maeve; but she babbled happily with the Lord, more than she would ever deign to speak with me. I saw she wanted to go. So I agreed.

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The only thing I could do then was work, desperately, and how I loved my work for the peace it gave me. Can you understand? There was so much to do after the winter, but it wasn't enough; I paced out the area for the wonder I was going to make, Maeve's night-garden, and cut the terraces myself and laid the forms for the concrete retaining walls and the stairs and balustrades. I spoke at length with the Botanist Lord and we prepared seedlings, slips and shoots. There were fine big hedges and trees in pots, that could be moved on rollers to the locations I wanted and set in place, to shade my darling's pleasure as though they'd grown there thirty years. The Lord was impressed when he saw my designs.

But Maeve was not impressed, when I would come to the Infirmary in the evenings to tell her what

I'd been doing. Sometimes she seemed barely to remember me. Sometimes she was impatient and disdainful. Sometimes the Lord Aegeus was with her, chatting intimately when I'd come in, and he'd scold her when she was rude to me.

All the while our son kicked in her womb.

So in the morning I couldn't rise early enough, and the lawns had never been so perfectly in trim, and Maeve's own exquisite garden took on such form all the immortal Lords and Ladies came out of the mountain to wonder at it. They took me aside and told me how proud of me they were. They told me I was going to far surpass old Claude. They gave me commissions for designs, pot gardens for their private suites. I devised a way to build a running stream and ferny grotto in a sitting room for the Lord Marcus. I devised an arbor of roses black as ink, approached along a walk framed by black irises and black velvet pansies, for the Lady Ereshkigal. I devised an apple with the savor of Black Elysium Liqueur for the Lord Nathan. Immortals have eclectic tastes. But I had their respect, and that was a great consolation to me.

I was hard at work when our little boy was born. Lord Aegeus was with her.

It was the Lord Victor who came to me with the news. I was setting the framework of the arbor in place, down on my hands and knees packing in the earth with a maul, when I looked up and saw him there.

He was a cold-looking young man, Lord Victor, with his green eyes and his pointed red beard; so when I saw that coldness laid aside and real compassion in his eyes, I knew something terrible had happened. I scrambled to my feet.

He said, "Master Simeon, Maeve is delivered of a son." And I said, "Has she died?"

He shook his head. I said, "What is it, then?" and he cleared his throat before he answered me.

When he spoke it was with such delicacy, and such chill, and such anger I was almost more concerned for his discomfort than my own. He said: "I have been delegated to inform you that you have the Company's profound thanks for your contribution to their breeding program. A hybrid was successfully delivered this afternoon and, although he does not have the desired characteristics, his survival proves that the program still has a fifty-three point three chance of producing its objective. Do you know what that means, mortal man?"

I stammered, "No, my Lord."

He said it meant I was divorced now.

I dropped the maul where I stood and I don't think I said anything. He grimaced and closed his eyes before he went on to say: "The girl will be assigned to another mortal male. They'll try her again, to see what another genetic mix might produce. You're a clever fellow, you must have seen that the Company had plans for Maeve! And you will be rewarded for your efforts, at least: bigger and finer rooms for you, and your operating budget will be tripled."

I said, "May I see the boy?" and he said, simply, "You don't want to see the boy."

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It wasn't until years later that I knew what Lord Victor meant.

I found my boy by chance, in the warren of residential rooms attached to the Infirmary. It doesn't matter what I was doing there.

I looked in through a door and saw the youth who might have been dead Fallon, except that what clumps of hair he had were the color of mine. He had his mushroom-white hands pressed over his eyes and was rocking himself to and fro on his bed, thumping his big head against the wall. But all across that

wall, and on the floor and even in corners of the ceiling, were scrawled mathematical formulae of such complexity I was dumfounded, though my grasp of engineering mathematics is better than most mortals'.

Do you know what it is to be cuckolded by a dead man, when he is no more than a film of ashes in his sunless grave? I know.

And it wasn't the first time I felt like a cuckold.

When Maeve had recovered sufficiently from the birth they gave her to a mortal I barely knew, who worked in their kitchens, and he got her with child but did not treat her well, so the immortals took her from him even sooner than they had taken her from me. The child was another boy.

She was passed then to the Lady Belisaria's mortal valet, and had another son; and then to the mortal who cleaned the pipes in the baths and reflecting pools, and produced yet another son. I lost track of her bridals after that.

Which is not to say I never saw her. I did glimpse her, now and again, wandering in the gardens to pick flowers or fruit. It was seldom, though, because she was seldom in any condition to walk far. And as the years went on Maeve's tiny perfect face became somehow a parody of itself, the features too sharp, the sweet mouth a little twisted.

But I finished her garden.

It far surpassed my topiary walk; the Lord and Ladies said so. How clever of me to make a moon-garden, all white and scented flowers and silvery herbage, best enjoyed under the stars! The scale was a little inconvenient for the immortals, as all the stone seats were set low and the stair risers too; but the neophyte classes, the children being transformed into immortals, found the place and made it their own. They played there in the long summer evenings and the dark trees echoed back their laughter. I had wanted children to laugh in that garden, but they were not my children.

Still, it was good that the place was used and loved. There was a moment, after I had planted the last narcissus bulb and opened the valve for the fountains, when I wanted to spray it all with Greek fire and destroy it in its completed perfection; but really that would have been a very stupid and ungrateful thing to do. If there is one thing the Lords and Ladies despise, it is wanton destruction, and surely I was better than the mortal men of the villages below us.

So I maintained it, and kept it beautiful. I was kneeling there one day when the Lord Victor came and sat on the steps beside me, watching a while. I was pruning the miniature roses. This must be done as carefully as paring a baby's fingernails, for they are not hardy bushes.

After a time he said, "How are you feeling these days, Master Simeon?"

I told him I was very well and thanked him for asking.

He was silent, staring at the little bushes. At last he said, "I'm leaving this mountain soon. I'm going off to do some field work at last."

I said, "Are you, my Lord?" and he made an affirmative sound. He stared out over the lawns, not seeming to see them. His hand went up to stroke his moustaches. He said, "It's a miserable posting, really. I'm being sent out to chase around after Totila. The Ostrogoth fellow, you know. He's all set to crush Rome again, and the Company needs someone on the spot to protect certain of its interests. I've been accessing data all week. Aegeus thinks I'm out of my mind."

I didn't know what to say so I just made sympathetic noises, and anyway I could tell that he was only speaking to me as a mortal man speaks to his dog. He went on: "He's right -- it's not a good way to begin a career. Not for someone with Executive training. I'll be wading into the mortal muck with the Preserver Class operatives! If Aegeus knew I'd requested it, he'd really be horrified.

"But I'm having a, what would you mortals call it? A crisis of faith, perhaps. Not a good thing, when one has a career to consider. I'd really rather not question my beliefs, but the longer I stay here in the midst of all this -- " he waved a hand at the pleasure gardens all around us -- "the harder it becomes. I think I need to go down into the mortal places and watch _real_ cruelty, real stupidity, real vanity. Perhaps then I can look at Aegeus with some sense of perspective. Perhaps then I'll learn to appreciate his point of view. Perhaps..."

His gaze drifted back to me. He sighed, supposing maybe that I had no idea what he was talking about. He said, "Do you know the myth of Jesus, Master Simeon?"

I told him of course I did. We are all taught about the dark superstitions that the mortals slave under, down there in their villages. Lord Victor said, "Do you suppose the Christ left Heaven for Earth to save mortal souls? Or is it possible he left because God's behavior disgusted him?"

I said it might be so.

He was silent a long time after that. At last he got to his feet, and his shadow fell across the work I was doing. He said, very quietly, "Master Simeon, I do beg your pardon." I squinted up at him where he loomed dark against the sun and I just nodded, for I couldn't think how to answer him. Then I looked down at my roses again and I saw his shadow move away from me.

I heard he went down into the mortal world not long after.

* * * *

Maeve was passed from mortal to mortal, and bore them all nothing but sons, which would have made her a very desirable wife indeed down in the mortal places where women were slaves, as I understood; but it did not seem to be what the immortals wanted from her. This even though some of the boys were quite presentable, kitten-faced children who could converse rationally and walk in the sunlight. Like their mother, they saw no particular virtue in courtesy or other social graces, and like her they were petted and spoiled by the Lords and Ladies who raised them. Most of them were little geniuses. They were not given eternal life, however.

And then, miraculously, Maeve bore a daughter to the mortal Wamba, who worked as a masseur in the Executive Gymnasium. What a celebration there was! Wamba was given new rooms and all the finery he could wear, and as a further favor he asked if he might divorce Maeve and marry one of the bath attendants, whom he had loved for some time. This was granted to him.

I don't know if Maeve cared. She basked for a while in the glory of having produced a daughter, and really a very pretty one; I saw the little girl when they were parading her around. She was not so pale as her mother, her skin was like rose petals and her hair like white gold; but she had the same great wide eyes and delicate face.

Yet Maeve, it seems, grew jealous of all the attention paid to her daughter. They caught her pinching the baby when she thought she was alone with it. The infant was taken away to be raised by Lady Maire and Maeve found herself in real disgrace for the first time in her life.

Lord Aegeus had no time for her, now. All his attentions were focused on little Amelie, the daughter. It was decided that Maeve had performed her duties admirably and would henceforth be allowed to rest. They allotted her a single room adjacent to the Infirmary. She would be given no new husbands, as her health had begun to suffer from constant breeding.

So I asked if I might have her back.

The Lords and Ladies bestowed her on me gladly enough, commending me for my sense of responsibility, but warned me that marital relations were best not resumed. They didn't need to tell me so

much; Maeve had become a small wizened thing by this time, collapsed and sagging like an old woman, though she can't have been thirty yet. Her skin had begun to mar, also, with thick white blotches like scar tissue. The Lords and Ladies told me it was from too much exposure to sunlight.

But I couldn't leave her indoors by herself, so I swathed her in a hooded cloak and carried her about with me, and set her in the shade as I worked.

She talked constantly. Mostly it was bitter complaints about the way no-one ever brought her presents any more, and how unfair life was. Sometimes she would wander in her mind and hold long conversations with Fallon. I don't think she recognized me even when her mind was clear. I wasn't angry about this. There had been so many, after all, and I don't think time and memory were the same for her kind as they were for me. Whatever her kind might be.

I wondered if this was how the immortal ones regard my own race. Are we so brief and small and foolish in their eyes?

Anyway, she didn't last long.

I had taken the midday meal with her, spooned soup into her toothless mouth and napkined her little chin, nodding my agreement to the stream of complaints that never stopped, even while she was eating. Then I carried her to the shade of one of the vast trees I had had transplanted for her, for we were in her own garden that day. I set her down where she could see me and went to arrange the new bedding plants around the fountain.

I heard her talking to Fallon again, and was grateful, because it meant I wouldn't have to keep nodding to show I was paying attention. After a while I noticed she had grown silent and I turned. She looked as though she had gone to sleep.

I buried her in the narcissus bed, and then I went to tell Lord Aegeus. Perhaps I should have told him first, but she was already beginning to crumble in on herself; and I was afraid he might have some further use for her poor body.

* * * *

I found Lord Aegeus in Lady Maire's quarters, and they each had one of little Amelie's hands and were pacing carefully beside her as she toddled along, chatting together over her head like happy parents. He actually looked blank for a moment when I told him my news.

But then he was instantly sympathetic, clapping me on the shoulder and commending me for my careful attention to dear old Maeve, and telling me how grateful he was I'd made her last days comfortable. He swung the baby up in his arms and held out her dimpled hand to me. He said, "You must thank your Uncle Simeon, Amelie. He was a good friend to your biological mamma." And the child patted my cheek and smiled at me with an intelligence that was, maybe, just a bit more human than Maeve's. Lady Maire exclaimed, "Isn't the sweet thing clever!" And Lord Aegeus kissed Amelie between her wide eyes and agreed that she was the cleverest, most precious little girl in the whole world. I don't think he noticed when I left.

* * * *

I planted a rose bush to mark the grave. It wasn't one of the elegant ones the Lords and Ladies so love. It was a wild rose with a single-petaled flower. It bears many thorns, it is half bramble; but the perfume of its white roses is intense, though they bloom in an hour and the petals scarcely last a day.

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