

BABY

—*Michaela N. Pfarr*

Her name was Evelyne, but most people just called her Baby. She was, in practically every way, a child to the ones around her: the only child to the Èmir, and the only granddaughter to the Sovereign Elder. Although it was twenty years after her birth, her face still held that gentle round shape that all babies have, and her eyes were wider than the greatest river, and darker brown than the richest soils of the world. Baby never wore her hair up, as she was often instructed to; instead she allowed her cornsilk curls to cascade down her shoulders, passed her elbows, and brush the small of her back. Though she was thin and fragile, she was tall and held the same regal air that her father, and her grandmother before her, also held. The air of a ruler.

But there was one misfortune that hovered over the heads of the Royal Family: their darling Baby did not speak.

Whether it was because she couldn't speak, or she just didn't choose to, no one knew. No amount of expensive medicine could undo what had been done, and she remained silent.

"How can you rule with no voice?" Her grandmother, the Sovereign Elder, asked her. This was a question that wasn't foreign to Baby's ears; she heard it every morning during their breakfast.

And just like every morning, Baby looked across the table at her grandmother and smiled, as if she knew a secret that nobody else did. Wouldn't you like to know, Baby thought.

Like clockwork, her grandmother rolled her eyes and turned to her son--Baby's father as well as the ruling Èmir. "Isn't there anything you can do? We cannot have a mute Èmir ruling over the Coalesce Regions."

The Coalesce Regions, Baby had been taught, were the continents of the World. Once they had been separate--all with their own rulers and religions. Once they had all been at war and people had died. Now, under the rule of the Èmir, there was no war, there were no religious tensions, there was just peace.

"Mother," the Èmir huffed, setting his fork aside, "we cannot rush what ought not to be rushed. Just because Baby cannot speak, it does not mean she is simple. You've seen her study records! She will talk when she is ready."

Baby grinned gratefully at her father. He'd supported her silence--in fact, he encouraged it. He believed in not only the power of words, but also the power of actions and emotions that could be expressed without a single uttered syllable. But no matter how many times her father defended her against her demanding grandmother, Baby knew that he, too, wished to hear her voice.

After breakfast the family dispersed. The Èmir had his daily duties of paperwork, phone calls, and conferences to attend to, while the Sovereign Elder had her own personal agenda to carry out. Baby had once spent the day with her grandmother and found it dreadfully dull: long hours spent in the Courtyard flirting with the young servants, puzzles, paintings, and other elegant delights wasted on the old woman's talentless hands. Baby refused to spend an entire day with the woman after that. She loved her--of course she did--but Baby couldn't seem to get that image of her grandmother batting her ancient eyelashes at the slender man serving tea out of her mind.

With everyone seeing to their own duties and pleasures, Baby found herself wandering the seldom-used corridors and small rooms of the palace. The building

was older than Baby could comprehend; she'd read stories about it in ancient texts and seen pictures from sketches done long ago. She knew, though, that this building had to have been kept standing in some way. The only "ancient" part of it was probably the stone slabs that made up the floor. She stopped in front of a relief sculpture, so old the edges were crumbling off the stone, and touched the wall gently. She knew that, beneath all of the manufactured marble and stone they'd used in renovations, there was a foundation that had seen so much history--so much culture--that it made her feel dizzy. Baby continued down the hall, which eventually ended at a window that reached her waist. Gripping the ledge, she leaned out into the open air, the wind catching her hair and twisting it about her face. The city below was just a blur of colors and shapes--not one human being was recognizable from the great height at which their palace sat. Beyond the city were the mountains, shrouded in morning mist and the clouds that never seemed to leave. Everything was green and grey until you looked directly upwards at the intense blue sky bathing in the golden sunlight. If Baby had gotten her hands on a pair of binoculars, she could see the very tips of the ocean before it vanished into the horizon. With a sigh, Baby leaned against the window sill. This was her favorite spot. Here, she could

see the city as it was, not as it appeared to be directly in front of the palace. Some days, if she remembered to bring those silly binoculars, she would spy on the families below. She knew most about them than any other cluster of families she'd spied on: she knew that the woman with the short brown hair had once had long, beautiful locks, but had cut her hair to afford some formula for her baby boy. She also knew that the woman had one other son, who was a soldier, and a husband who was often away on business. She knew that there was an old, well-to-do couple who gave the woman money and food and clothes and companionship. Baby even knew about the secret alcove in the mountain on which her palace stood. She called it Lover's Keep, because of all the young lovers she's seen steal away into it for a few passionate moments.

"Who goes there?" A man's voice bounced off the stone walls, breaking Baby from her surveying. Baby lifted her hand in an enthusiastic wave as the man stepped forward into the natural light from the window. He wore an officer's uniform: grey pants and a blue and white military jacket. There was a single star pinned to the collar of his crisp white shirt. The man bowed, "Highness. I didn't know you were here."

Baby rolled her eyes, "You really oughtn't lie to the future Èmir."

The man smirked and sauntered

forward, "Well the future Èmir shouldn't be lingering in the dark corridors of the castle, spying on commoners."

Baby leaned out the window again, causing the soldier to hurry forward and grip her forearm. She shot him a look of mock-horror, and returned to her view out the window. "I'm not spying, Justin. I'm just... observing. You know Father won't let me go outside--not as long as I'm not speaking. And God knows what Grandmother would do--maybe have a heart attack?" She sighed. "Besides, I cannot see anything from this prison."

Justin handed her something black and slender--but heavy. Her binoculars. "Not without these, you can't."

Baby smiled, but didn't take them from the serviceman. "No, I don't think I'll use them today."

"Has something bothered you?"

Baby shrugged her shoulders gingerly, too afraid that the improper, mundane action would get her into trouble even without her grandmother present. "Is it so hard to accept that I don't speak?"

"But you do speak. You're speaking to me right now, aren't you?"

Baby waved her hand, dismissing his comment. "No, no, no. I mean speak around others. You know I've never said a word--I didn't even babble as a babe!"

Justin shook his head, "I don't understand. You speak with me perfectly. You even sound like an Èmir."

"Despite my... disability, I was

still given the same schooling any member of the Royal Family would have received. By reading and listening to speeches I was able to talk. The doctors called it selective mutism; I could talk if I wanted to, but I just didn't feel like it. When I met you," she smiled, "I'd been speaking for only a little while."

"It was still a surprise to hear you speaking at all," Justin chuckled.

Baby rubbed her arms self-consciously, "I don't know what I'm trying to gain by lying to my father like this. But by being quiet my whole life, I've been able to see so much!" She gestured out the window. "There are people down there who can't afford to feed or clothe their children. A woman had to sell her hair--her beautiful brown hair--in order to buy some formula for her baby! We might not have war, but there is still poverty and hunger living at our feet."

Justin's eyes had started to shine as tears threatened to spill. "Where is this woman?"

Baby motioned for the officer to produce the binoculars, and pointed into the blur of houses down below. "She lives in the white house--the one right across from the nice blue one. She had hair nearly as long as mine before she cut it." She absently touched the hair framing her face. What a terrible thing, she thought, to have to sell hair just to afford baby formula.

Justin made a choking noise and pulled away from the window, tears spilling down his face.

"What on earth's gotten into

you?" Baby demanded.

"That's my mother's home," Justin muttered. "I'd known things were bad, but I hadn't known how bad. My father's a tradesman, you see. He's gone most of the time, and half the time the money he makes is 'lost,'" he made quotation marks with his fingers, "overseas. If you ask me, he just drinks or gambles it all away. My God, if I could just--" His sentence was cut short when Baby's fragile little arms encircled his body, and she held him in a firm embrace.

"I'll talk to my father," she whispered. "This will stop."

Later that evening, as the Royal Family sat around the table for supper, and the Sovereign Elder complained about her day, Baby was plotting. She had promised Justin she would do something this very evening to stop his mother's suffering--as well as the suffering of everyone else. She knew that it would involve speaking, and her stomach formed anticipated knots that left her feeling parched.

"So, darling, how was your day?" The Sovereign Elder asked, hoping to coax a word or two from her tight-lipped progeny.

Baby pushed her roasted baby carrots around her plate for a moment, mustering up the courage to say something--anything.

"Dear, don't be impolite," the Emir scolded lightly.

She looked up with a smile,

“Eventful, Grandmother. My day was eventful.”

Forks clattered onto plates and mandibles dropped low, revealing half-chewed food. All manners set aside for this one moment of pure shock. The Sovereign Elder stammered, trying to find her own words, but it was the Emir who spoke: “Your voice...”

Evelyne pushed aside her plate and stood before her leader and once-leader. “Not just my voice, Father... I have seen things that you, who are so swamped with other duties, cannot see. Or perhaps you choose not to see them, for they are quite ugly. But I have seen them. I’ve seen the sadness, Father. I’ve found my voice, though, and I want to use it for the sad. That is, if you’ll let me speak.” 