

## *The Fourth Feeling From Mutual*

When John Offengetiz awoke in the morning he felt horrible. Over the course of 48 hours he got much, much worse until he got much, much better.

That morning he went to Babylon, a small island in the tropics, where those of Cancer and Capricorn meet, deep in the torrid zone, so that he and his girlfriend Claudia could sit in the Solarium and listen to the Eagle King speak. Claudia had heard of the Eagle King and Babylon and the Solarium from Jenna and Laurie, two friends of hers, friends who did not particularly see eye to eye with John Offengetiz.

“You just *have* to go, Claud. He’s amazing, you’ll see. Listening to him will change your life!” cries Laurie.

“And,” smiles Jenna, “he’s so goddamn hot. You’ve never met a man like him before...” and as she says this Jenna’s eyes drift off dreamily, apparently lost in happy memory.

John Offengetiz was in the room listening to all of this. Claudia looked over at him. There was something in her look that gave John cause to blush for embarrassment.

“Let’s go, yea John? It’ll be good for us. Maybe it will help you...”

This exchange was taking place in John Offengetiz’ apartment. At least, it was his apartment insofar as he paid for it. Claudia lived there with him, and she and her friends used the place as a sort of springboard for all their little outings. And more often than not as a crashing place too, for when they came back from their metropolitan adventures John would be forced on to the couch so that they could sleep comfortably and boozily in his bed. Now Jenna and Laurie turned their attentions for the first time that day towards John Offengetiz. He felt like a mouse being stared at by two hungry vipers.

“*Yesss*, it might help you John. You know, with your little problem...” Jenna says with a slight downward glance of her eyes.

“Oh, how rude! We forgot to invite you, didn’t we John? You should definitely come too!” cries Laurie, non-committally.

So John agreed to go, despite the fact that tropical weather did not agree with him and that this excursion would take up his one week of vacation for the whole year. But he agreed to go, despite all that, because John Offengetiz loved Claudia. At least, he was supposed to love her. After all, Claudia was a young and attractive woman. Perhaps too attractive for someone like John Offengetiz, who was passable at best. He didn’t earn an impressive salary either. And he wasn’t very popular; held no lofty position, let alone a bottom-feeding one, on the totem pole that was New York *society*. In fact, he was surprised he had been able to get together with Claudia in the first place, what with her being so pretty and all, and as a result he did whatever he could to make her happy. He did all this so Claudia would stay with him. This, he knew, was in opposition to what Jenna and Laurie felt and had in mind for their friend Claudia, and although they weren’t so rude, or perhaps so crass, as to say anything directly to his face, he sometimes heard them airing their thoughts when they believed he wasn’t around.

“What do you even see in him?”

“He’s not really that handsome, Claud...”

“He’s no Einstein, either, if you know what I mean...”

“And look at this apartment he’s got you staying in! C’mon Claud...you could do *so* much better!”

John Offenetiz would hear these things through the thin door that separated his apartment from the corridor of the complex, and then he would go for another lap around the block, so that when he returned the conversation would have moved on from that point and he could enter comfortably, or at least somewhat less awkwardly, under the sideways glances of the two girls and the pity-filled look from Claudia.

So that is why when Claudia turned to John Offenetiz and asked him to come to Babylon he said yes. And when that morning came around John Offenetiz awoke early, much earlier than Claudia, so that he could finish packing her valise for her. Then he went out to the street to pick up fresh bagels from the bakery next door that Claudia loved so much and prepared breakfast for the both of them. After she woke up and ate John waited patiently as she finished taking her shower and blow drying her hair and scrabbling through her belongings. Then he carried her valise down the thin and rickety stairwell that led to his apartment, loaded it into the trunk of his Toyota Tercel, and drove to Jenna’s place to pick her up. She was coming too. Then he drove to Laurie’s to do the same.



On a small and half-forgotten out of the way island right smack dab in the middle of the torrid zone lay Babylon. To get there one first had to board a plane from JFK bound for Puerto Rico, and from there take another, smaller, chartered plane to a second island whose name itself hardly makes it onto maps. From here one would then have to fetch a private ferry to their final destination. This ferry would slope along the blue ocean haze of unchartered Caribbean, pirate territory, until it caught sight of an even smaller island, pyramidal in shape, rising up from the sea to a point on top, and deposit you within the yellow arms of a small cay which served as Babylon’s port and only means of relative civilized access.

This is where John Offenetiz and the three girls from New York landed on Babylon, a cay of cornmeal yellow sand enclosed by the slopes of the sides of the island like the pincers of a crab. The rest of the island was composed principally of this rising point, a mountain exemplar, which at one time must have been an active volcano, centrally placed, the procreator and sustainer of this dot of land in the vast oceanic world. Now it was dormant, or at least there were no violent rumblings, and taking advantage of this peace were plenty of pretty birds of paradise flying about, encircling its peak with their drunkenly colourful feathers.

The heat here was incredible and John Offenetiz was suffering under the penetrating rays of the sun. The girls limberly jumped off the boat, their long white legs splashing in the salty waves, and ran off up ahead while he struggled to dismount the small native ferry with the collective valises of the three women weighing him down. There was a waiting party lined up along the far end of the beach. From a distance they looked like a flag waving oozily in the wind. On closer inspection, it became clear that this effect was created by the fact that they were all dressed in the same attire, like the nuns of a tropical habit.

By the time John Offenetiz reached the waiting party he was drenched in sweat and dizzy enough to faint. Despite the heavy heat pressing down and numbing all his senses, he became immediately aware of several things. The first was the waiting party. It was made up of

men and women. And what women they were. Of every shade of skin available to mankind, bronzed and beautified by the island sun, over lithe and lively figures that had the spring and bounce of happiness and the easy and natural sex appeal that comes to liberated youth.

The men, on the other hand, gave off none of this vibrance. They stood docilely under the beating sun, their attire much heavier and less breathable than their female counterparts, with their chins bowed patiently. Most remarkably, they all had shaved heads, and the sun beamed off their bald skulls like a hundred blinding mirrors into John's tired eyes.

But despite all this, and most of all, most blaringly, like a frozen sword stabbing square in the heart of the concentrated heat of the equator, John Offengetiz noticed the Eagle King.

The Eagle King stood taller than the rest of the group. A sort of height that always made him the tallest in the room without being overbearing. His skin was golden and tanned and wrapped snugly around compact and beautifully composed muscles. His feet were sculpted and well defined with straight, long toes, the sort of feet one usually sees only on surfers, but the Eagle King was no surfer. Despite the paradisiacal setting, the hordes of beautiful women and the uni-formed men, the Eagle King gave off none of those hippie-spiritual-leader vibes – in fact, his look was quite severe. He was extremely handsome and violent looking. Something like a fugitive of the world, with his dark eyebrows and the scar running diagonally through the right one. He wore his hair drawn back, jet black, with stripes of grey, over a strong forehead and angular face. But his most prominent features were his blue and grey eyes. They were the eyes of an eagle – a supreme predator, a being that kills for pleasure.

But he was a religious man, at least that is what the girls had told Claudia, and he gave his sermons in a space near the top of Babylon, and this space was called the Solarium.

The women in the waiting party led the three girls away while John Offengetiz was escorted by the uni-formed men to his lodgings; a few hammocks set up between some trees in a circle with a meager thatched roof for protection from the inevitable tropical storms. Nothing more than a patchwork hut, hastily assembled, with some mesh thrown over it all to keep out the bugs at night. Then the Eagle King directed the uni-formed men off to their specific duties, and having done that walked off cool-as-you-please towards the summit, where his own undoubtedly less austere lodgings were situated. His eyes never once came to acknowledge John.

John dropped the valises and lay down on one of the hammocks, trying to rest his mind and his body in the striped shadows of the high hanging palm leaves. He had hardly had time to adjust himself comfortably on the swaying bed when Claudia and the girls returned, gushing with excitement about the wonders and the beauty of the island, the Solarium, and the Eagle King. They began to brush and preen themselves in preparation for the sermon that they were to attend that evening. And then suddenly they were off, and without a word to John Offengetiz. Quickly he stood up and off the hammock and walked after Claudia.

“Are we heading to the Solarium?”

Claudia twisted her head in shock at the sound of his voice. For a brief second her eyes were full of the undeniable look of contempt. But quickly it vanished and she offered him a weak smile.

“Oh, hey babe, yea, let's go. It's about to start, we don't want to be late, right?”



The Solarium was a sort of big, spacious, transparent bubble that occupied a clearing about half way up the island, under the silent watch of the blistering peak. The banana leaves brushed against the enclosure, which appeared to be made of glass but behaved more like a membrane. Either way, it was obviously imbued with some special property, for it somehow managed to not turn the interior of the dome stifling. It was clear and airy inside, with the same sort of flora that covered the rest of the island, but evidently groomed and with the unmistakable scent of human design.

During the day the Solarium served as a sort of playground where the women on the island would lounge and chat under the shade of a few select trees or by the edges of a rocky petite grotto. At night, the Solarium was the church of Babylon, and from here, by a pulpit carved out of a volcanic boulder that dominated the far end of the structure, the Eagle King would give his sermons.

John Offengetiz entered the Solarium with Claudia and the girls and sat on the grass and watched as the rest of the attendees poured in. They came and flung themselves down on the ground, or nestled together under the trees, or dipped their heads out from under the water of the grotto and came to rest their elbows on the edge, each individual attention fully devoted to the pulpit at the far end. And as the Solarium filled John became increasingly aware that none of the uni-formed men were present. It dawned on him suddenly that he was the only man in all the Solarium, surrounded by scores of beautiful women, whose collective sweet scents began to fill the inside of the bubble and intoxicate his lungs, working its way through his bloodstream until John began to feel thoroughly giddy. He found that he enjoyed this feeling, that somehow being surrounded by so many beautiful women inspired a newfound strength and vigour for life within him, and he was beginning to have the slightest of hopes that he may enjoy this trip. And as quickly as that hope sprouted it was pulled out roughly and by the roots.

By the light of a red and bloody tropical dusk the Eagle King appeared at the pulpit of the Solarium. The light filtered through the membrane of the enclosure, so that the very air became infused with the colour and every person and every object took on its hue until it seemed that the whole world had been tinted vermillion.

And then he began his sermon. He was quite the orator, the Eagle King, or so it seemed to John Offengetiz, and by his words he moved these young and impressionable ladies to religious ecstasy, he stoked the flames of a fervent spiritual fire that grew in their breasts, the women sweat, the whole Solarium filled with the smell of all these young women, of all these pretty and beautiful specimens, all of them clean and pristine, they sweat and sweat until the air in the Solarium became thick with it, and it was sweet and pleasant, like a ripe and hot mango peeled right off the tree, the smell of all these pretty women's sweat.

That is, it seemed to John that it was the words of the Eagle King that had this astonishing effect on the women, but in reality he did not know what to make of the sermon. The Eagle King spoke in English, but for some strange reason John Offengetiz could not make sense of any of the words. It was as though he was listening to the sermon in a dream, and although they were all words he recognized, he was unable to string them together or make meaning or sense of any of it. It was as though the language was reserved for the women.

Some of the women began to moan in true ecstasy now, and climb over and about each other, rubbing their bodies together, letting the sweat drip until John feared that he may drown in it all, in this gushing female orgy. And just as he began to choke in it for real the sermon ended.

Immediately Jenna and Laurie grabbed Claudia and brought her to the stone pulpit at the far end of the Solarium. John Offengetiz watched as the girls exchanged some words with the Eagle King. Even from a distance John could see the intensity in Claudia's eyes as she regarded the man. He could see her joke and laugh with him. He could even imagine that he heard her voice fly up a few octaves. All this had the effect of filling John's chest with a heavy weight, like a chunk of lead pressing uncomfortable up against his heart. Suddenly he felt cold and agitated, despite the humid warmth that permeated the Solarium. He diverted his gaze, trying to interest himself in the other women as they collected themselves after the taxing sermon. But he couldn't truly focus, not with his Claudia in arms length of that man, and out of the corner of his eye he saw that the Eagle King was leaving, and that Claudia and the girls were making to leave with him. Quickly, almost without thinking, John jumped up and ran over to meet them.

Claudia's skin was still glistening with the sweat of the sermon. John made to get her attention by putting his hand round her forearm. Violently, as though she was battling off an assaulter, she pulled her arm away from him and John shrunk back, like a child from a scornful parent. There was a wild flash in her eye as she addressed him.

"Wait for me back at the hammocks. I won't be long. Have a good night."

The girls ran off, giggling, excited, overwhelmed even, so much did the sermon affect them, they could hardly even speak, they ran off to the Eagle King's private quarters, a beautiful wooden pavilion perched against the side of the mountain just above the Solarium, leaving John Offengetiz alone. He turned and walked back to the quarters set aside for him – the hammock slung between two trees, at the bottom of Babylon, just off the cay.

Claudia did not return at all that night.



Needless to say, John Offengetiz did not sleep well. And when he awoke in the morning he had but only one sweet instant of peace before the memory of where he was and what had happened flooded back to him. And when he turned to his side and saw that Claudia was not lying beside him, and that it was obvious that none of the hammocks had been slept in, he was overcome with a horrible sense of dread. Like a shadow descending over him, gripping him, his stomach knotted, his neck ached, his teeth hurt, so much pain was John in that he felt he might die but for the extra effort of it.

Not knowing what to do, sweating uncomfortably in the haze under the trees, he walked up to the Solarium. Inside, little blue and red and yellow birds flittered about, singing their happy song that resounded off the high walls of the giant bubble. The usual cohort of scantily clad women were enjoying the water of the grotto or taking the sun as it filtered through the membrane. The air inside was crisp and fresh and hot enough to fill a man with all the lust for life that comes only in the tropics.

And under a broad leaf from a fat and squat tropical tree, so ancient it simply oozed jungle juices, John Offengetiz found the Eagle King lounging, splaying his body out easily in the shade over the earth, and under his arm and resting her head on his belly was Claudia.

John felt something insidious develop in him; a rock-hard lump that set root in his throat and silenced him, trembling and sweating in turns, his head whirling, on the verge of fainting. So it was true. It was as he had suspected. She slept with him. But, how could she...how could she do this to me? – thought John.

“I can tell that you are uncomfortable with this, John. Why don’t you say something?”

The Eagle King’s matter-of-fact tone brought John back to the moment. John looked up from the floor between his feet into the unwavering and penetrating steely eyes. He made to respond, say something nonchalant-like, as if to shrug it off, as though he were totally indifferent to the fact that his girlfriend had seemingly spent the night with this strange and handsome man and was now resting her face on his lap. But the lump in his throat stopped him, and he could only mutter something about the heat being too much.

“John, you are a horrible liar. Come, we must speak. Let us go for a little walk around Babylon.” The Eagle King turned to Claudia “Will you excuse us for a moment?”

Claudia looked up and smiled at the Eagle King with sparkling eyes, the eyes of a religious devotee. She still hadn’t registered John’s presence when the two of them walked off.

The Eagle King led John Offengetiz out of the Solarium and began guiding him through the thick foliage that grew abundantly and unchecked throughout Babylon. They navigated over large and lumpy roots that criss-crossed the dirt jungle floor, itself creeping incessantly with all sorts of greenery and macroscopic life, interlacing and mingling so that the entire landscape was a constantly shifting scene, like a vendetta against a still-life.

“Where are you, John?”

John’s voice was still choked. He struggled to say Babylon.

“No,” said the Eagle King “you’re not. You might think you’re in Babylon, but up in here –” he leant forward and tapped John’s skull loudly with his index finger “– in here you’re still all the way in Bobby Land.”

John flinched at the touch. He couldn’t properly meet the eyes of the Eagle King, but he felt their immense pressure. In their presence and under that figure John Offengetiz could feel nothing but shame. Shame for his frame, which was tiny and weak and frail in comparison. And shame for being so much less of a man. He didn’t respond and the Eagle King spoke again.

“I am master here, John. Does that make you feel uncomfortable?”

John’s eyes flitted for a split-second. When he responded he let out a little laugh to give the impression that he was in on the joke. Uncomfortable? Ha-ha, why should he be?

“Because it means that I can do whatever I like, and that you cannot. In fact, it means you must do as I say, so long as you choose to stay.”

John still wasn’t sure if the Eagle King was joking. He half-heartedly let out a chuckle but the Eagle King only stared blankly back at him. John’s face sunk.

Since leaving the Solarium they had been ascending, moving up towards the wooden villa that jutted right out the rock face of the mountain, supported by great pillars of tree trunks that drove straight down into the earth. This was the Eagle King’s personal residence on the island, sandwiched in the space above the Solarium and below the lip of the peak. Fittingly it was

called the Eyrie, so precariously placed as it was. And just like an eagle's nest it gave a wide view of its territory. This was accomplished by a balcony that wrapped around all free sides of this imperious villa in the sky.

John had caught glimpse of the Eyrie the night before, as he stood back in shock, watching Claudia leave him to come here, powerless to stop her. Now as he entered, hesitant in spirit but unable to detach himself from the Eagle King, the layout gave rise to disturbing images in his mind. Silken sheets scattered about the floor, Persian rugs, pillows amongst bowls of fruit, carafes of wine and candles of different heights, at different ages in their own mortal lives, waiting until the day the last bit of wax melts away. Several women lounged about, hardly dressed, hair tussled, with looks of deep satisfaction splayed indecently across their faces and evident in their smiles. All this sensuality furnished the setting for John's imagination, and he could hardly bare to be in the place, knowing that just the night before Claudia had been here with this man. This scary and tall and disturbingly handsome man.

"Witness, John, for I am the Eagle King, the richest man in Babylon."

And saying this he stepped out onto the balcony and spread his arms wide over the expanse beyond them. Just beneath where they stood the Solarium sat tranquil, a misty bubble, and through the membrane John could see the pulpit and the rocky grotto and the little birds and trees and pretty girls skipping lightly in their bikinis. As for the rest of the vista, John's eyes took in the tops of the trees, and the blue sky, the birds that chattered about, the cornmeal cay and the wide spread of the ocean beyond, meeting the sky all around the edges of the horizon, like they were in their very own, albeit larger, bubble.

"But you, John, are still in Bobby Land. So tell me, what is it that you're doing here? You know very well that you don't belong here. Not yet, at least. Because you still half-believe the lies they taught you there. And the worst part is, you've suspected them to be lies all along. But it's so difficult, isn't it, John, to come to grips with reality? It's easier, I know, to hold on to the lies."

John Offengetiz looked at the Eagle King with wide eyes and a twitching face. Sweat began to pour uncontrollably from the palms of his hands and his feet and from the pits of his arms came cool droplets of water that dripped down his flanks to the floor. What on Earth was this man talking about? John was overcome with a shiver and a strong urge to pee.

"This is why you've never felt right, John, why you've never felt at home. You've never found your place in the world. Not to worry John, I will tell you about this world. I will teach you about Babylon. Are you ready? Good. John, in this world, there are two things. The everlasting, the always present, the word that cannot be put into words, the pure truth, the One God. And then there is power. The struggle for power."

"From the tiniest microbe to a hulking beast, all life is constantly in this strife. And man is no exception. In fact, he exemplifies it. And man has two choices: to be a master or to be a slave. There is no in-between. There is no third option. There is no opting out. There is no escaping the power struggle. Where could you escape to? It's all there is, in the realm of men."

John stood, fixated by the Eagle King's voice, which had the extraordinary effect of bypassing his ears and driving directly into his mind, so that he felt it deep in his gut. So fearful was he of this man that he stood there paralyzed like a bug that could well escape its predator's violent approach if only it didn't succumb to the hypnotic and mind-numbing fear of it all.

“Enough talk, let me demonstrate.”

The Eagle King drew John across the balcony so that they now faced the far side of the island. And suddenly a new vista opened up before them. In place of the pretty birds of paradise swooped eagles like vigilant sentinels, like the secret police of a sham socialist state. And instead of a cornmeal cay there were jagged and imposing and uninviting rocks descending harshly into the sea, causing it to spray up and crash against this impenetrable stone wall.

There was no Solarium on the far side of the island. In its place there were several small wooden structures from which wafts of smoke drifted hazily up in the heat. Between and about these structures John could spy several of the uni-formed men milling about, carting cases and wheeling barrels to and fro. He even thought he could see some of them slinging around assault rifles, hung by straps round their shoulders.

“There happens to be an unusual species of plant that grows naturally on this island,” began the Eagle King “...and it just so happens that this plant is very valuable to certain people. From what I gather, these people find the chemical properties of this plant appealing. It also happens to be illegal in most parts of Bobby Land. Of course, the laws of Bobby Land mean absolutely nothing here.”

John looked hesitantly at the Eagle King, not wanting to suggest, but the look on his face betrayed his thoughts and the Eagle King spoke for him.

“What did you think, John? A man must make his money somehow. Money is power, made tangible. Come, let me show you another operation of ours.”

The Eagle King left the Eyrie via a staircase that descended down the far side of the balcony with John in tow. As they passed over the processing plants the fumes given off snuck up John’s nostrils and tickled his brain entrails. Suddenly he became both light and heavy-headed simultaneously. The colours pressed out at him more intently, the macroscopic life was more alive, and it was gruesome and violent.

Despairingly, John stumbled awkwardly in the wake of the Eagle King, who navigated the jungle terrain like a creature born from the primordial amniotic fluid of the Earth itself. They skirted just below the lip of the peak until they arrived at a cleft carved into the side of the mountain, resulting in a small valley that drew down from near and far sides onto a flat landing. The whole place looked like it had been cleared by fires. Eagles circled above.

On the landing there were cages of various sizes, stacked up one on top of another. And inside each cage came the growl or the chirp or the screech or simply the neon ashen eyes of some wild and exotic animal. Lions, jaguars and tigers, all sorts of birds, sizes and specimens, monkeys, chimps and lizards, Komodo dragons and marine iguanas and the like.

The Eagle King went off ahead, walking down the side of the valley towards the grass burnt yellow under the sun. There were several uni-formed men attending to the cages, some splashing water over them, washing them out, exciting the animals inside who responded violently in turn, but their violence was frustrated by the bars of their iron prisons. Others held buckets from which they would toss subsidence to these caged animals.

It was to one of these carrion-chuckers that the Eagle King went and took the bucket into his own hands.

“Observe” he said simply.

There were several eagles crowded nearby, picking at the body of some dead marsupial, picking out its intestines with their razor-sharp beaks, their eyes frozen sideways, watching the Eagle King out the corner of their eyes.

To John, whose fume-induced delirium was still in full-swing, the faces of the eagles were evil, gruesome things. The flesh that moved about them was pink with the blood beneath it and he saw nothing in their eyes but death and unbridled violence. It was as though he was looking a hungry velociraptor right in the face.

The Eagle King tossed some carrion in their direction. For a moment the eagles lifted their vicious heads out the mess of guts to curiously examine the food. But no sooner had they done so that their vile faces were overcome with a disgusting look of contempt and they flew up and away in a gust of wind, sending the caged animals into a panic.

“Do you know why they don’t take the food?” said the Eagle King. “Because they know that if they were to accept something from me that they would grow to be indebted to me. That I would have power over them. And the eagle can’t abide debt. It’s a dog’s world to kill or be killed. In many ways, John, these birds are much smarter than you.”

As the Eagle King spoke a scene was unfolding at the other end of the valley. Two of the uni-formed men, standing on top of several cages, had been transferring the contents of one to another, but at the shock stirred by the eagles’ alarming retreat the creature inside began to jump and roar, knocking against the sides of the cage until one of the uni-formed men fell from the height. A horrible crunch was heard, and then a wailing, and it was obvious that the uni-formed man had broken his leg.

The lion was out of the cage and on him in an instant. The other uni-formed men made to lift their guns at the beast but the Eagle King’s voice cut through the confusion.

“No,” he called “not yet...”

Silently, obediently, without the slightest hint of defiance, the uni-formed men lowered their guns.

Hunger and shame moved the lion to great heights of frenzy, and it tore into the helpless man, ripping him apart limb from limb. Guttural wrenching of sinews, tearing flesh from bone, creeping mercilessly into John’s ears, invading his stomach, dark cold fear in his heart.

Now at a sign from the Eagle King the uni-formed men lifted their automatic rifles and let forth a barrage of shots, an incessant thunder storm, filling the lion’s body with pock-marks. Shot up and bloody it collapsed over the carcass of the uni-formed man.

“Shame,” the Eagle King tossed the bucket of chow back to one of the uni-formed men “This one would have sold nicely for its fur. But it’s near impossible getting one of these back in their cage once they’ve decided to get out. Still, it pays to prove a point, and such a dramatic one at that.”

He turned back to John. “Oh, don’t look so shocked John. Violence is what gave birth to this place. And violence sustains it. You shirk from the work, it scares you, you’ve got the backwards thinking of good and evil. You haven’t seen the One Truth yet. Come, let me show you.”

The Eagle King led John Offengetiz out of the valley and they climbed the last few hundred meters that wound round the top of the mountain to the peak. Now the eagles that circled were dangerously close, their wings spread wide, wafting over the hot air that blew out

the top of the mountain like a furnace. With every step the heat intensified more and more until John felt that it was scorching him, both from the sun which seemed to be just over his head and the ground beneath him that began to boil. Right at the rim the Eagle King stopped and inclined his head down, and John Offenetiz followed his gaze. And from the belly of the earth the volcano at the centre of Babylon burped up a great big bubble of fiery lava that popped and shot a geyser of prehistoric heat right into John's face.



“So, John. Let us come to the issue at hand. Will you stay on Babylon? There may be a place for you here. Either way, I suspect that Claudia will stay...”

There was something in the way the Eagle King said her name that confirmed all of John's worst suspicions. As though saying her name was enough to reveal that he had had her in every way imaginable, in more ways than John had or ever could.

The lump that had been in his throat began to dissolve. Something about the heat of the volcano was disintegrating it. Something about that immense heat, the closeness of so much raw power, inspired in him the confidence to open his mouth and speak directly from the heart.

“But I do so much for her!”

“And what exactly do you think that means? That she owes you something in return? Don't be silly, John.”

“What! But doesn't she love me?”

The Eagle King looked down at John. “How real is this love? Do you think it's any more real than power? Than food and shelter? Than everything that I can provide her with? Would you starve yourself for the sake of love? What does love have to do with Babylon, John? I already told you, the only thing that exists here is power.”

John's entire body shook. A surge of energy was running through him, but it felt so alien, he was so unaccustomed to it that he didn't know how to contain it. The initial impetus began to fail him.

“But...there's not much difference between you and me, right? In the grand scheme of things, I mean. We're both just men after all, human beings, imperfect things...”

The Eagle King let out a great laugh.

“Don't kid yourself John. No man is perfect. But that doesn't mean that some aren't closer to perfection. Between you and me is the fourth feeling from mutual.”

John could only take the insult full on the face, and keep going.

“But...it's wrong, isn't it? Doing this...it's wrong! What you're doing here, with the women, the uni-formed men, the plants and all those animals...it's wrong!”

“In some ways, I do pity you John. You're so very indoctrinated. It's ridiculous! What do you mean to do now? Take the moral high-ground? What abysmal stuff. Keep it to yourself. I for one can't stomach it. The national anthem of Bobby Land. Dancing along to the tune in the faith and fear of what's expected of you. John, why lie to yourself! You know full and well that nobody cares for any of that. Even in Bobby Land, that most hypocritical of places, no one respects the moral. Really, hideously and hiddenly, despite all their public praise of it, they despise it.”

“But...I thought you were a spiritual man!”

“You think when I say *God* I mean that one? Even so, it pays to be a student of history. You think God is meek? You think God rewards meekness!? Look around you! This is the jungle. This is God’s very own creation! They kill each other here, ruthlessly, unapologetically, without the slightest hesitation. Why should humans be any different?”

“Even so, haven’t you got a conscious? Even if it’s entirely personal, don’t you have a sense of guilt...?”

The Eagle King seemed annoyed by this suggestion. His lips curled downwards in a frown and he looked off, in a way that seemed, for the first time, almost thoughtful.

“I chose not to carry on that tradition. Guilt is just another method of control. Guilt only moves down the ladder. It doesn’t move up. Cowardly and passive, but control nonetheless.”

“That’s how it is in Bobby Land. Suckled on morals in your infancy, bastardized fairy tales and happy endings. All so that you grow up with the judge and jury inside of you. It really is quite ingenious, I must admit. But not to my taste, not one bit. I prefer the direct if sometimes brutal method. That is why I came here. That is why I made Babylon. A man must make his way in this world, one way or another. And I was never fit to be a slave.”

“Wagers and dealers of guilt. That’s the sort of men that Bobby Land produces. It’s the national currency. They don’t make time for truth. Hypocrites, in a word. They’re called the finger pointers, John, and that’s all their good for.”

Now the Eagle King brought his gaze back down to John, his lips drawn back in a sadistic grin, exposing his vicious canines.

“But you’re not a finger pointer, are you John? No...you know you’re not. That’s too far above you, to be even that. You know what your role is...there’s no denying it.”

There’s a relationship that exists between people in very distinct places. It can be seen in the deference a student shows towards their teacher, or the regard a patient has for their doctor. Regardless, it exists when one person looks towards another as though this person has *the* answer, and they wait with bated breath to hear what the other has to say, supposing that their words will bring to them some revelation that will change their life once and for all and indelibly. This is the way John Offengetiz looked at the Eagle King.

“Don’t you know who you are? I saw the second you landed on the beach, I knew what you were, just like you’d know a skunk when you see one, for that big white line that runs through its back, unmistakable. But no, you’re no skunk John. What you are is a fool and a cuckold.”

John Offengetiz looked at the Eagle King expectantly, not wanting to hear these words, but unable to escape them. The Eagle King’s eyes remained intense, they gave no way, they were proud in what they said, and John could only try to swallow it.

“You know that, don’t you, John? Deep down, you know that this is your lot in life. And why not? Someone has to play that role. We are social creatures, John. Every person has their place in a society. And this is yours.”

“That...that’s...that’s not true...” started John, and then a rebellious idea came to him. “What if I choose not to believe you? Who are you, to tell me the way the world is?”

The Eagle King looked down at John Offengetiz with his unreadable aviary eyes, the blue eyes of a visceral hawk, of an ancient creature that knows its place in the world, in the natural hierarchy of life and death.

“Take my advice, John. If you’re not in a position to have opinions...don’t have any.”

John sensed that he had come up against a brick wall. An impenetrable barrier, far above his capacities to surmount. Like a test he was simply not intelligent enough to pass, no matter how hard he studied for it.

“To be honest I take pleasure in belittling you,” continued the Eagle King, “I feel like a cat whose cornered a small mouse, playing with it, pawing it. Not that I’m hungry. No, not in the slightest. Just enjoying the act.”

“Why! Why are you doing this to me?”

Now the Eagle King’s face screwed up into an ironic grin.

“You say that as though I have a choice in the matter. As though everything has not already been pre-ordained. As though a cat tortures a mouse for any reason other than that is what it is meant to do. As though I should harm myself, like you have harmed yourself, and continue to do so, by denying what you are, by acting contrary to what is in your nature, and what is in your stars!”

“For a man in your position, you are lucky. Yet you remain unhappy. Why? Because you keep resisting. Stop resisting against the *world* John. No one will like you for it. Resign yourself to your place.”

“The sort of power here, on Babylon, is honest. It’s brutal, like the animals. There is only one King of Babylon. This keeps things simple. And who’s going to challenge me? Are you going to challenge me, John?”

The Eagle King looked down at John with his predatory eyes and John shivered.

“No, of course you’re not. How could you challenge me? That’s not in your character, John.”

Now the Eagle King turned his back to John and spread his arms wide over the mouth of the volcano, obviously taking pleasure in the hellish heat that surfaced, absorbing it into himself.

“You know what word I like, John? *Fool-Proof*. Like a fool-proof plan. A plan so airtight in its conception that not even a fool could mess it up. Well, I’ll tell you right now, John, Babylon is a fool-proof place. No fool could ever overthrow or create even the tiniest stir.”

For a moment they stood by the lip of the volcano, over the bubbling cauldron of lava that gurgled up at them, giving off the heat and stench of the belly of the earth. The Eagle King stood just ahead of John, at the very cusp of the volcano, on a piece of rock that was slightly declining inwards. He kept his back to John, taking in the immensity of the view before him, apparently lost in it, not paying the slightest heed to the bundle of nerves that was on the verge of exploding behind him. And immediately John saw that it would only take but the slightest of pushes to knock the Eagle King over and into the blistering melted rock, and then that would be the end of that, and he would have Claudia back, and then *he* would be the all-powerful leader of Babylon. That he could have all the women of the Solarium if he so wished; that he would head the nefarious operations conducted from this outpost of pirate territory, if only he so desired. For a moment the thought of it all shocked John’s nerves till they stood on ends, and he was ready to pounce, like a bolt of lightning.

The Eagle King turned and looked at John Offenetiz and smiled.

“So, what do you say, John?”

In that moment John Offenetiz felt soft and fluffy as though he were a giant cotton puff. Wisps of white fur curled round him, and for an instant he saw himself as an overgrown sheep, 1000 feet below the gaze of a killer high up in the sky, completely at its mercy.

“Yes, you’re right” said John.



That night John Offenetiz lay comfortably in his hammock, comfortably dressed in the uni-form of the island, stroking his bald head, a great easy smile splayed across his face as he drifted off peacefully into sleep. He slept so well, in fact, that even the sounds of moaning that carried down the mountain, emanating from the Eyrie, in a voice that was all too familiar, did not disturb him in the slightest.