

Odd Beds

"This'll be all yours for the weekend. Enjoy!"

Chagos was impressed. They'd entered directly from the elevator into a 120 square meter room. It was a pentagonal, split-level area quaintly centered on a conversation pit. The décor was the most horrendously postmodern schlock he'd ever seen, so it must have cost a mint.

Thick, puddle-shaped rattan mats were strewn about the floor so that they overlapped each other in places. Wherever only a single layer covered it, luxuriously oiled red hardwood glistened through the weave. Slipping off his boots, Chagos found that as he walked, the mats' textures massaged the soles of his feet through his socks. Custard-colored carpet covered the closest three of the five walls. He pressed his palms against one: velvet pile, sumptuously soft. His callouses carried away a few tender fibers, producing teeny ripping sounds like microscopic Velcro pads tearing free. No outside noise intruded here. The endlessly convoluting, garishly eclectic murmurations of downtown traffic flitted silently past the fourth wall: a floor-to-ceiling window offering a grand view of the bustling city below.

Three tall, triangular, off-kilter steps, one olive green, one mustard yellow, the last raspberry blue, led down the split into the conversation pit. They looked dangerous. Avoiding them, he elected to descend by clambering over the back of a heavily distressed, chocolate suede couch. He had some trouble. It looked overstuffed to the point of puffiness, but when he stepped down onto a seat cushion his leg sank in even more deeply than anticipated. Shifted off balance and fearing to crack his skull on a massive glass replica of a Tyrannosaurus Rex skull that seemed intended to serve as a coffee table, he windmilled his arms, wrenched his free leg around behind him, and flopped on his back into the couch's embrace.

"What's that?" He asked, and pointed at the fifth wall. More than a wall, it was a loading door. A square port hole was set in the middle of it.

"That's where the bed lives," Carol replied.

"So I sleep in there?"

Carol's eyes narrowed and her eyebrows rose. Through quizzically pursed lips, her tone grew condescending. "No, that's his private quarters. You can have him set up anywhere in here, though, when you're ready."

"...him?"

"You should introduce yourself. Go see if he's in, brief him on your schedule." She gestured at the small door.

Adopting a kind of loose-boned back float to counteract the couch's quicksand pliability, Chagos wiggled his way to its edge and poured himself onto the floor. He eased to his feet and sauntered over. The small door's base was at shoulder height, just large enough to stick his head through. He pulled it open and leaned inside to behold an impossible space.

His room conformed to the shape of one half of the tower they were in, so he should have been looking onto roughly the same view as from the window. Instead, a lush, misty, forest valley rolled away from where he peered through his little viewing port. Whereas it was midmorning where his body stood, he'd thrust his head into a fragrant, buggy evening. In the distance he could just discern two figures loping back and forth on a tennis lawn. Their shadows extended long beyond them to dance among tangles of colorfully blooming vines which seemed

to clutch protectively at a low-walled but sprawling home. It was nestled in a tiny divide between two purple mountains, vast but smooth as river glass, crowned in golden light.

Cicadas buzzed insistently, gnats whined past his head. From every direction unseen animals were hooting and whistling. Tree limbs snapped as bulky things propelled themselves through the canopy above. A million birds chatted, squabbled, and flirted. One of the figures in the distance swung their racquet high for a leaping serve, then three seconds later a ghostly “pok!” blew in on a breeze. After the dead silence of the hotel room, what would ordinarily be a soothing soundscape crashed onto Chagos’ head like he’d opened a submarine’s hatch underwater. He sneezed.

“Great hell-o-scopes! You scared me.”

Chagos whipped his gaze to the right, then his startled instincts whipped his head right back, knocking his cheek bone sharply into the little door’s frame. He shoved himself away from the wall, then lunged to slam the door shut.

“What, what what what!?” Carol shouted as she rushed to his side. “Did something hit you?”

“No, I..” She had begun fussing at his cheek, squeezing it to see if it would bleed, “No! I, ouch! What the hell are you doing? There’s a-, a giant ape in there!”

Carol’s hands dropped abruptly.

“Of course there is.” She recoiled from him, wrinkling her nose at him. “You’re an ape. What’s wrong with apes?”

“No, like, huge, hairy!” He was waving his arms above his head. “Like an orangutan but bigger! Biggest animal I’ve ever seen!”

Carol’s utter lack of alarm calmed him somewhat. The arms deflated and drifted to his sides.

“It scared me. Well, I scared it. I came out over its shoulder. I think it was reading. It had glasses on.”

“His shoulder,” Carol corrected. “That’s the guest bed. I slept on Ermina, his wife, last night. You should have introduced yourself, you’re being very rude.”

Before Chagos could reply, a mechanical clunk interrupted, followed by electric whirring as the nearby wall rolled up into the ceiling. It revealed, indeed, what looked like a giant orangutan. One hand gingerly clutched a pair of pince-nez spectacles and a large-print magazine, the other dragged a rough-spun, rainbow-mandala-patterned, hemp satchel. Twelve feet tall, the top of his head fit neatly under the door span. He was extremely wide, with massive arms that extended to the floor, rippling with muscle. His legs were extremely short. They pushed against his portly belly as he stepped into the room, looking not unlike a penguin carrying an egg. His hair, which covered his entire body save his broad face, was neatly combed, shining like a new penny. He wore a loosely braided beard that graced a pouch of slack, dark skin under his chin. His mustache was trained. Without wax it curled well beyond his lips, but only halfway to the edges of his prodigious cheek pads. The door quickly closed behind him, cutting off the gust of humid wind that followed him. The room filled with the scent of cedar, cut grass, and a hint of pipe smoke. He settled onto his haunches and extended a hand, then a finger, toward Chagos’ right hand. Chagos shook it.

“Pleased. Name’s Martin,” the ape rumbled. “Bad meeting like that, is your head ok?”

The beady hazel eyes that punctuated his stony, satellite-dish face, though shadowed by a heavy brow, were kindly. He regarded the scuff on Chagos' cheek with fatherly concern.

"More or less", Chagos replied.

Martin fitted his glasses over his eyes, carefully bracing them between his cheek pads. He raised his head to engage bifocal lenses, and studied Chagos. He rested one hand on his stomach. With the other he wiggled the magazine thoughtfully.

"New in town?" He asked.

Chagos glanced at Carol, then shrugged.

"I guess it's easy to tell," he said.

"I just don't recognize you. But yes, It must be your first time this high up, if you've only slept on dead beds before."

Carol put a hand on Chagos' shoulder, quickly withdrew it, looked at it, then stuck it in her back pocket.

"Oh Chagos! Do you mean you were surface scu- er, had been on the surface... closer to the surface... Where did you say you're from?"

"I didn't," he replied. "I was born in Michigan."

"Oh. Never heard of it."

"Earth?"

"Nope."

"Well some people know about it. It's where us apes come from," he grumbled, waving a forefinger back and forth to draw a line between him and Martin.

"I'm sure that's what you've been told," she smirked. "You should have said you were a surface drug lord or a pimp or something. At least that would have been exciting." She wandered off to fix herself an antiseptic doubling as a drink from the minibar: a rusty old oil barrel set on its side, raised on a marble plinth, fully clad in miniscule diamonds, and bristling with intoxicant-dispensing turrets.

"I've heard of Earth," Martin said in a conciliatory tone. "Probably not yours, though," he continued with a regretful grimace. "The one I'm thinking of is mostly hydroponic ant farms. Atmosphere's no good anymore."

He cleared his throat with a magnitude that rattled Chagos' ribcage.

"And no offense, but if someone appears to be of a species related to you, it's probably best practice to treat it as a case of convergent evolution." He raised his arms in a stretch, then grabbed up his satchel and pulled out a thin muslin sheet. It had periwinkle pinstripes and little cartoon ducklings on it.

"I'm not too hung up on that kind of thing," he continued, "but you'll find it's widely considered rude to assume another's genotype." Flattening the sheet, three meters wide on each side, on the floor in front of him, he gestured to it with an upturned palm.

"So did you want to have a nap?"

"On the floor?" Chagos asked.

"No, he picks you up!"

Carol's eyes were watering from the fumes off whatever she'd had the minibar dispense. She circled her arms in front of her and swung them side-to-side.

"Like since you were a baby! How do they sleep on Arf?"

"I don't know," Chagos mumbled. "Soft things on the ground, more or less. Maybe a hammock."

The ape looked down on him with evident pity.

"This is much more dignified for this time and place, I can assure you. And I'm told," he said, a touch wistfully, "It's powerfully therapeutic."

He patted the sheet.

"Go ahead, try it out. You don't have to sleep, but I don't mind if you do. I'm paid well to be here. If you hate it, you'll be able to give the hotel staff plenty of notice to find you some other arrangement."

Chagos wrinkled his nose. He massaged his forehead. Looking down at the cheery little ducklings bouncing through their blue and white infinity, he couldn't muster any logical argument against what he already felt his body priming itself to do. It felt wrong in a prejudicial way. He didn't want to be infantilized, but didn't know why. He'd often pined for the times in his life before awareness of fear, or at least before the existential, complex fears that matured along with his sense of being, or relative lack thereof.

Feeling a little hot behind the ears, he lay down and let himself be swaddled.