

OLIVER KARLIN

"There's a lot to meeting Odo for the first time," said Rebecca. "But the one thing you must not forget is to make sure you have come in before you try to go out."

"I usually manage that," said Cal sarcastically.

They were in an unremarkable, ground floor apartment. The sparse furniture was coated with dust. Rebecca led Cal down the short hallway and stopped in front of a door that might have led to a closet.

"Sure, here, but Odo lives in a different time," said Rebecca patiently.

"You mean like the past?"

"The past is the past of our time. I mean a different time. The important point is that you can't just leave." She took his hand. "Promise me you'll wait until I say it's okay."

"I promise," he said.

"Take a big first step, the passage is not something you want to linger over." She held his hand for a moment longer. "I'll go first. Try not to slam the door." She stepped forward, and opened the door. He saw a large hall, far bigger than the room they were in and seemingly bigger than this whole apartment would hold. But, it was also hard to be sure because Rebecca seemed to shadow the entire doorway and then she stepped through and the door closed quickly behind her. Cal was left alone in the empty apartment.

He reached for the door knob and hesitated. "I could just walk away," he thought. "I don't have to take a side in this fight." He thought about Rebecca. As he was thinking the door swung open and a woman came through. She backed out of the other room and shut the door gently behind her. When she turned he thought for a moment it was Rebecca, but this woman was far older and her face was weather-beaten.

"Hello Cal, I am Bethanne, the door warden. I've come to see when you will be joining us. Rebecca has been waiting for you." The woman spoke without inflection and there was no emotion on her face except perhaps at the corners of her mouth where an old playfulness had retreated.

"I'm coming," said Cal. He was annoyed. He was pretty sure he'd been about to decide to go, but now the decision had been made for him and he couldn't know. "After you," he said.

"I can't go through until you have," she said.

Resolutely Cal reached for the door knob, turned it and, remembering Rebecca's advice, took a big first step. Cal was turned inside out like a plastic bag in the wind. When awareness of where he was returned, he was pulling shut a massive door made of dark, glistening wood. Or, the door was closing in a rush and he was resisting it. That second realization came too late and door came crashing closed.

He turned around to face the room. There was a vaulted ceiling far above his head and the hall was wider than the apartment building he'd just been in. At the far end of the hall he saw stairs leading up and down to other floors. An enormously fat man entered the hall through a large, arched passageway.

The fat man moved with grace and with power. When he was still a distance from Cal he said in a booming voice, "I am Odo Vacar. Welcome." Cal was at a loss for words and found himself tilting his head slightly in deference to the giant man. The man turned and strode back the way he'd come. Cal was obviously meant to follow him.

He looked back at the door he'd taken to get here. "You mustn't try to go back before being sure you have arrived," said the man over his shoulder.

"I know that," said Cal under his breath.

The room they entered was a vast library. Bookshelves lined every wall to the ceiling, interrupted only by heavily curtained windows and a large fireplace. Two high backed chairs were pulled close to the crackling fire. The man was already seated. Cal sat down in the other chair. He could hear water beating against the windows.

"You interest me, Cal," said Odo Vacar. Cal didn't know what to say to that so he let it pass without responding. "I asked Rebecca about you." Now Cal could tell the man was fishing. Odo smiled in appreciation of Cal's reticence. "She wanted to tell me but apparently she'd promised you not to and that was remarkably binding."

Cal shifted uneasily in his chair. There was an edge of menace in everything Odo said. "Where is Rebecca? That woman said she was waiting for me."

"She's sleeping. Rebecca did wait, for most of the night. She fell asleep after I sent Bethanne."

"Fell asleep? Is she okay?"

"That's not how it works," said Odo. Answers are given in return for answers. You are my guest so I will allow you to ask the first question."

Cal was sure he didn't want to play a game of Truth or Dare with a Odo. He also, however, wanted answers. "Does asking about the rules of this game count as a question?"

"Yes, every question counts. What is your true name?"

Cal's heart beat furiously. He was afraid of what he might answer. And what disturbed him more was that he didn't know why that frightened him. "Cal," said Cal much to his own relief. "My adopted father's last name is ... was Smith. But I was given the surname of Ward by the state of New York. Cal Ward is how the world knows me but only the Cal part is about me." By the time he finished talking he knew one rule of the game: the answers to the questions were truthful, full, and hard to control. He still wanted to know about Rebecca but he also thought he might need an escape plan. "How does that door work and why does it matter who goes through when?"

"My time and the one you come from only touch at that door. Each advances at its own pace; time mostly moves when it wills. Hours can pass in one world and in the other it could be a day, or not even an instant. The latter is the danger. You could come through my door and then, when you go back, you'd return at the very moment you'd left and meet yourself in the doorway. Besides destroying yourself you could damage my door. Only after someone else journeys through do both times have a new present. Bethanne serves as that someone else. Her passage marks time in both worlds."