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“*Harbinger*,” he hissed.

“Come again, sir?” He reached out.

“Harbinger of my *freedom*.”

As anyone in such a situation might do, I looked to the general space behind me into which the vector of his extended arm continued—no one.

“Sir,” I began, but he rushed forward and clapped a hand over my lips before I could continue. Age seemed to seep surreally from his skin with the stench of wet wood, as though he’d seen entire eras rise and be torn down by the greedy hooks and sledges of time.

“You seen my smoke and you come to let me go,” he squeaked, the beginnings of tears somehow glinting from the dusty sockets of his face. His tremulous hand moved to cup the line of my jaw and stroke it tenderly with the pad of his thumb. For the moment, I was made an uncertain child he seemed to know; a surrogate for whomever this man had obviously expected.

“I’m not who you seem to think I am,” I pleaded. “I don’t even know you. We’ve only just met.” There came more wet, throaty laughter.

“Don’t have to know me, child. Only have to say I’m free.” Child, indeed. I supposed by comparison a man of forty might seem infantile to a forest-dwelling Methuselah. Now, I had begun to disregard the man’s tidy facade to once more entertain the possibility of dementia. Certainly concerned for his mental constitution, I urged him toward explanation; the press of logic, I hoped, would filter his cluttered mind.

“Why do you stay? The door is there, who keeps you here that I should have to free you?”

“*Bah*,” he grunted, waving me off. “The door is broken.”

“Broken? But, sir, I just opened and shut it moments ago. It’s on its hinges, perfectly functional—not even a squeak.”

“You go ahead, walk out. Find your way to the shoreline and follow it around, let it lead you to where the backwaters meet the main—where you’re certain to see the visitor’s lodge—but its silhouette is absent. Follow it to where the rocks repeat their sinister patterns in the red Earth and the identical trees soon become the side of this old cabin again. The whole thing is stitched shut like a loop of cursed fabric. I tell you, the door is broken.”

I stood and went for the door again, lifting a hand to quiet the man’s resistant shout. I peered out into the black night and estimated the direction and distance of my cabin by observing moonlit reflections in the twisting water. The landscape remained untouched, as I’d left it. There was, of course, no transformative magic, merely the confused imagination of an elderly man prone to getting lost.

“See, here, the water bends just *that* way around the corner there,” I explained, gesturing to match my words. “If you need me to take you to the lodge, I’d be happy to show you the way.” I made another, smaller gesture Eastward. “My canoe is right down there.”

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