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MIDWINTERBLOOD



PART ONE

Midsummer Sun

June 2073 – The Flower Moon



One

The sun does not go down.

This is the first thing that Eric Seven notices about Blessed Island. There will be many other strange things that he will notice, before the forgetting takes hold of him, but that will come later.

For now, he checks his watch as he stands at the top of the island's solitary hill, gazing to where the sun should set. It has gone midnight, but the sun still shines, barely dipping its heavy rim into the sea on the far horizon.

The island is so far north.

He shakes his head.

He's thinking about Merle. How something seems to wait in her eyes. How he felt calm, just standing next to her.

'Well, so it is,' he says, smiling with wonder.

He's tired. His journey has been a long one.



The strangeness began on the plane.

The flight to Skarpness was not full, maybe half the seats were empty, but there was nevertheless a good number of people. Mining company folk mostly, heading to the

northern interior, Eric guessed.

He took his seat by the window and did what everyone does before the instruction to switch off communications; he selected OneDegree on his device, and bumped.

And then . . . nothing.

He rebooted the app, and bumped again.

Nothing.

He shook his head, unable to understand it.

The OneDegree app is based on the principle of six degrees of separation. Eric knows all about it. As a journalist, it is his job to know about communication in its many forms. Since its invention, when some clever soul realised that it often takes not *six*, but merely *one* step to connect you to most other people in the world, the app, or its current version, sits in the palm of everyone's hand. When going on a journey, or arriving in a new place, the easiest way to make friends quickly is to bump the air around you with OneDegree. Maybe no one you know is on the same plane, but someone who knows someone you know is likely to be. Or someone who went to school with a friend of yours. Or who works where you worked ten years ago. And so on and so on. Then you have someone to pass the journey with, at the least, and maybe a new friend for life. And although that's never happened to Eric, in all his years of using OneDegree on so many solitary journeys around the world, he has never failed to find some kind of link among a group of a hundred or more who would otherwise have remained total strangers.

So that is why he stared a moment longer at his device, wondering if the new version had a bug.

As if something sinister had happened, he leaned out of his seat and a little furtively studied his fellow passengers.

They were a tough lot.

Miners, he thought. Tough.

Work and worry were drawn on their faces, in skin aged by the cold. They were silent, merely nodding at the smiling attendants who floated down the aisle, proffering drinks.

'You'll have to switch that off now, Mr Seven,' said a voice, and he turned to see one of them looking down at him. She checked her device, making sure she'd got his name right.

He scratched the back of his head, pushed a badly behaved strand of dark brown hair out of his eyes.

'Yes. Sorry, right. Only . . .'

He looked at his device.

'Yes, Mr Seven?'

He shook his head. How could he have managed not to bump anyone on the flight? Not even at the weakest level of connection.

'Nothing.'

The attendant smiled.

'Very good. Have a nice flight, Mr Seven.'



He did have a nice flight.

The plane arrowed due north, clinging to the coast almost the whole way. It was spectacularly beautiful.

The coastline was a broken fractal, the sea was deep

blue, the rocks of the shore gentle mottled greys and browns. Inland, the ground climbed steadily into forests, which eventually gave way to treeless mountaintops.

About noon the plane landed at Skarpness, and as Eric predicted, most of the passengers picked up transport heading for the big mine.

For the hundredth time, he pulled out the instructions the desk editor's assistant had given him, and made his way on foot to the ferry terminal, where he boarded the steam-boat for the short trip to Blessed Island.

He knows little about the place.

Just the rumours. But then, that's all anyone knows, and that, after all, is the whole point of his trip, to find out something about the island.

There is nothing much about it on the net. Nothing beyond the times of the steam-boat, the hours of sun-fall and moon-up, a brief history of the old fishing trade, now gone.

As for the rumours . . .

No first-hand accounts, no original source material. The pages that do mention them are simply rehashes of each other, leaving very few original hits to glean anything from.

So little to be read on the net; that's another strange thing about the place.

All he's heard are the rumours, stories, the speculation, and the swiftly lost words of whispered secrets, about the island where people have started to live forever.