

The Goddamn Sun
by
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The boat creaked, the waves sloshed, and Edgar Macombe stared forward, hatred in his heart. The icy waters crashed over the bow as he rowed, barely inching forward towards the flat sheet of land.

At least he thought it was land. Like everything here it was covered in a sheet of ice. The ocean itself had chunks bobbing, and even through the thick leather and lamb's wool coat he'd stolen from the Captain before the ship had gone down, his bones were chilled and he could barely feel his extremities.

How would he kill that bastard if his fingers wouldn't pull a trigger?

He was close enough to shore now that he could see another boat, and he knew it had to belong to Wydale. It had been abandoned on the icy shore, oars thrown casually in the sand. A few more minutes of pulling the oars, as his huffs made clouds around him, and he could see a scrim of ice across the paddles. Any tracks would have been melted, but the island looked tiny -- wherever it was -- and he'd search every inch if he had to. After nearly a year. Wydale would die today.

Arms aching and the smell of seaweed and gull shit in his nostrils, Macombe finally reached the shore. The sound of rocks on wood and he was scrambling up and out of the little dinghy. His boots hit the water and shock punched up through his legs, drawing an involuntary gasp. He hauled the little craft up onto the shore, stumbled a few steps forward, and collapsed, looking back out at the sea.

For a moment he had nothing left. He could still see the top mast of the sinking ship he'd fled, flames long since smothered by the waves. Wydale had been stowed away, trying this one last trick to escape him, and it'd taken him nearly a week to find the bastard, holed up in the cargo, hiding between bags of grain.

He'd almost had him then, but Wydale had lashed out and knocked the lantern from his hand. Bags of grain went up fast, and in the flash of the grain dust, Wydale had knocked him down and run. By the time he'd gotten out of the inferno, there'd been no time and only a single boat left. He'd had to kill the Captain to get that. One more sin on a long list he was happy to pay to see Wydale dead.

Two years he'd chased Wydale. From San Francisco across the wilds of America, all the way to the East coast. Three times he'd caught up to him. Once in Idaho, where Wydale had shot him in the gut and left him for dead. Macombe had crawled out of the woods into a Shoshone encampment and they'd gotten him back on his feet. In return he stole a horse, a rifle, and food, leaving in the dead of night, barely able to stay on the beast.

Weeks ago he'd caught Wydale in Tennessee, just for a second, as the bastard was stealing a stagecoach. He'd emptied his Colt at the man, there in the middle of the street. At least one round had punched through his foot. He'd seen it then and confirmed it today as Wydale thrashed and escaped from the cargo hold.

It might be wrapped well enough to have not left a trail on the ice, but it had to be slowing him down, and in this cold it would slow him down more. Unless there was a thriving fishing industry on this tiny icy rock, there was nowhere left for Wydale to go. He would finally pay for the lives he'd ruined.

Macombe forced himself to his feet, brushing ice off his pants and coat, and checked his revolver. Fully loaded and still dry. When he found Wydale he wouldn't hesitate. No elaborate speeches, no last minute monologue about his sins. Just a bullet and it would finally be over, and they could both rest.

Macombe walked into the interior of the island, over ice and lichen covered stones, following a trickle of a river that still hadn't frozen solid somehow. He had no idea how long it had been since he'd eaten. How long since he'd slept in a bed. But none of it mattered anymore than the numbness in his feet and the stitch in his side where he'd been shot. Because there, along the opposite bank of the stream, he saw blood.

It was the tiniest drop, and he could have easily missed it and continued along into the cold and died, never having had his vengeance. Instead he crossed the stream, the water soaking his boots. He knew it was bad, knew it could kill him, and didn't care. Because he could see another drop now, and another further on.

Macombe crept forward, restraining himself from breaking into a lope. He was impatient, but had been doing this so long. He knew he didn't have many more chances, and he wasn't going to ruin this one. So he crept from stain to stain as they grew larger, until he saw the fire.

On a turfed plain, tucked behind two boulders that made an effective wall against the cold wind, a stack of driftwood burned. He'd started a nice cozy fire, but Wydale was nowhere to be seen. Standing in the frozen wind, Macombe stared at the fire and imagined its warmth. His feet were ice now. He couldn't feel them nearly up to his ankles.

But where was Wydale?

He scanned the horizon slowly, looking for some clue, as the snow started falling. Leading away to the east, he saw a faint trail of blood, and as he did, he moved closer to the fire. Maybe there was time to warm his hands and feet before Wydale returned. To be between him and the fire. To take the shot and still survive.

Keeping an eye in the direction of the blood trail, he moved closer to the little fire, which is why he didn't see Wydale when he rose from behind the rocks, stiff with cold, but still capable of pulling a trigger.

Wydale shot him twice. Once in the right shoulder and once in the left leg. Macombe pitched forward and went face down on the snowy turf. He struggled to rise, but Wydale, audibly chattering, reach down and pulled Macombe's pistol from its holster, and pressed him back down into the frozen turf by stepping on his wounded leg, and said, "Stay down, you son of a bitch."

Macombe tried to rise, and Wydale stomped on his spine.

"I said stay down. You've chased me across half the damned world and near killed me twice. And now we're both shot and freezing, and I'm going to have my say before we die."

Macombe twisted, tried to spit, and said, "Go to hell, Clifford Wydale. You got nothing to say to me. You stole my wife, twice, you goddamn devil."

"I got nothing to say? No, I got plenty. I did steal your wife, but just the once, when I took her ashes and ran, and that was at her say so, before you killed her, you bastard."

"You lie." Macombe's voice was shaky.

"No, I'm a lot of things, most of them not worth a damn, but I'm no liar, and you know it."

"She loved me, I know she did."

"She did, once. And then you ignored her and beat her and treated her like dirt, and then one day she didn't anymore. And that's all on you."

Macombe moaned and made a sound like a small animal in a trap, deep down in his chest.

"And then she came to me," Wydale continued. "And I let her, and she filled me up with light. Like I'd swallowed the sun. And in the short time we had, she told me she dreamed of places like Iceland and Norway, where everywhere she turned was white and pure, instead of dirty and terrible. So here we are. The three of us, together."

Macombe pawed at Wydale's leg feebly, his mouth moving, but no words left. Wydale turned and warmed his hands by the fire, then walked away, leaving a trail of blood.

Ten paces away he shouted back over the wind, "Like I swallowed the goddamn sun, Edgar."

And then the snow blotted them out.