

# The Descent

By J. Davidson Hero

“We are as we speak above the harbor of Havana, gentlemen.” The barrel-chested, red-bearded captain reached out over the rail with a sweeping gesture, his voice booming in a Southern drawl. The captain and his two visitors were standing at the very front of the aerostat on a kind of observation deck, the lower of two observation decks in fact. It was like a balcony, open to the night air and very wide. One of the visitors, Juan Fernando Royo, in an act of good faith took a step closer to the edge, but leaning forward slightly could see only wisps of clouds and darkness in the light of the waning moon. His companion, a rough freedom fighter named Pablo, chose to stay back. He instead eyed the three armed crewmen in light blue uniforms standing at attention against the wall behind them in the shadow of the airship’s huge metallic envelope.

“Please gentlemen, y’all are my guests, and therefore perfectly safe. Don’t you want to see what your money has paid for? It shall be truly magnificent.”

“I beg your pardon, Captain Onger, but the height is dizzying,” Juan Fernando said, clutching the rail and inching up alongside the captain. “We mean no disrespect. Your ship is truly amazing.”

“Yes, the Aurora is a work of art. Never has her like sailed the skies. Now if you look there,” the captain said, pointing down through the darkness, “you’ll see our target.” Juan Fernando strained to see, but the lack of moonlight, the clouds, and the shadow from the airship made it impossible for him to discern anything.

“What is it I am looking for captain?” he asked after an awkward moment.

“Yes, it is a bit dark, but I will rectify that momentarily.” The captain chuckled to himself. “Trust me when I tell you that we are right now flying above the USS Maine.”

“The American ship? Captain, there must be some confusion. We sought your aid in our noble struggle to drive the Spanish oppressors from the shores of Cuba. The Americans are potentially a threat, but not paramount. A demonstration of strength against the Spanish is what we wanted. We did not pay...” The captain cut him off.

“You want liberation Mister Royo, you’ll have to pay for that with your own blood. I have no intention of fighting a war for you, sir, but I can start one. And that may help you more than you’d think.”

Juan Fernando reached for the captain’s arm in protest. His companion Pablo tensed, his hand reaching for the hilt of a knife at his belt. The three crewmen brought their guns to bear simultaneously like automatons.

The captain motioned and one of the crewmen went to the nearest wall and lifted a voice pipe to his mouth. Juan Fernando heard a shrill whistle followed by the muffled sound of the crewman's voice.

"Gentlemen," the captain said, "the devil is not your enemy, but he only barter on his own terms."

Juan Fernando heard the sound of machinery from deep within the aerostat. He felt static prickle his scalp, and then there was the crack of a lightning strike and below, the explosion of the Maine lit the night. He looked to the captain to try to fathom his reasoning, but Captain Onger had turned his attention to the upper balcony.

\*\*\*

"So you were on the upper balcony this evening my dear?" he asked.

Her smile was curt. Constance Onger sat in her parlor aboard the Aurora, a book in hand. Her husband, the captain, took a seat on the chair opposite her, and crossed his legs. The room was not overly large, but it was decorated extravagantly. The walls had dark wood wainscoting, a Gothic floral-patterned wall paper in maroon, and a frieze depicting scenes from the Old Testament. Lavish paintings and mirrors hung from the walls. A large globe in the center of the ceiling provided an electric light.

"I asked you to stay in our quarters tonight. What ever prompted you to disobey my wishes?" he asked.

"What have you wrought Mordecai?" Her face was stern; her stare penetrating.

Captain Onger thought about how beautiful she was, how her dark hair danced in curls about her neck, how regal she was, born into grace. He would cross the deepest ocean, master the skies, break any man for her if she desired it, but still he returned her stare with a sneer. He was not in the mood to justify his actions, even though she was the only one in the wide world granted this dispensation, the right to question his supreme authority.

"Have I not provided for you, Constance, all the best? Given you the life you were born to, but had forsaken? Have I not protected you and done everything for you? Why do you question me so?" he asked.

Tears started to well up in her eyes, but she maintained her dignity. "Do not use me as an excuse for your actions any longer. I heard your conversation with those men. Tell me you did not murder men in their sleep. Do you fashion yourself the angel of death now? You will bring the wrath of God down upon us Mordecai."

Her condescension made his face as red as his beard. He grabbed her arm violently. “They thought to buy my might to crush their enemies. I granted their boon, but I work for no one but myself... and you.” The captain added the last part too late. Her face contorted with disgust.

“You have changed. I have watched it happen. I have denied it until now, but no longer. You have become a monster.”

He scoffed. “I have become myself.”

She rose from her chair, shaking, but strong. “Captain Onger, I am leaving you.”

“You’ll have nothing. Here I’ve given you the world.”

She looked at him through a veil of tears. “No captain, I gave you my world, but it wasn’t enough.”

The End