

PROMPT #3: Every year, one person is sent to the moon. This year, though you hid in terror, it is your turn to enter the rocket.

Bravado and Bravery

by **Theodore Naecher**

After the revolution, Jack had run low on money. He was plenty capable of most jobs, but his desire for adrenaline left him bored and unfulfilled with whatever job he managed to pick up. The revolution had given him a desire for, nay, an addiction to danger. So after a couple months of putting parts on cars, he quit. A war connection had mentioned to him some Germans in south Florida who were willing to pay serious money to get around the Feds. They wanted unregistered machine guns they could smuggle out of Cuba to the States and then to Germany.

“What are they going to do with the machine guns?” Bill asked.

“Hell if I know, it’s none of my business,” Jack said.

“I’d figure it’s plenty your business, you are the one smuggling them after all.”

“The mailman doesn’t know what the packages he delivers are used for, does he? Anyways, I’d rather not know. I’d like to assume they’d be used for non-malicious purposes.”

“You know they aren’t going to be,” Bill said.

“I don’t know shit, actually, as I haven’t been told what they’re going to be used for. I’m just a mailman.”

“What the hell.”

As Jack came into Ballast Key at three in the morning, he guided himself to the green fishing light the Germans had promised to shine. As he got closer, he tried to listen to them talking, but heard no German. Only very well spoken English. He figured he ought to turn

around, but before he could turn the wheel even a degree, the noise of a police speedboat startled him, and guns were pointed at the *Romero*, and he was caught.

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“Drink this, you son of a bitch,” Alvarez told Jack, handing him a rum and coke. Not two hours prior Alvarez had dragged Jack out of his bedroom, damn near cussing him out. Alvarez had no tolerance for cowardice. He had fought against the Communists in Cuba alongside Jack. That’s why he held Jack to the standard he did. He had seen him drink and smoke and fight and shoot at submarines from a half wooden fishing boat. Alvarez knew Jack was better than this and knew he wasn’t as worthless as he was putting on.

“What happened to sailing the *Romero* and shooting at submarines?” Alvarez asked.

“That’s passed,” Jack said.

“It was three years ago, Jack. You just don’t forget how to do shit like that.”

“And it was two years ago I got myself into this garbage. Should’ve just taken the jail time.”

“That decision is done and gone and you can’t do anything about it now,” Alvarez told him. “If I hear you talk more rot like that, getting all down on yourself, I’m going to sock you right in the jaw.”

Jack said nothing and stared absentmindedly at his full drink.

“You got yourself into this mess, and no matter what happened yesterday, or the day before, you get up and bite the bullet,” Alvarez continued.

“What if I don’t want to?” Jack said, without making eye contact.

=“To hell if you don’t want to.” Again, Jack said nothing.

“You’re doing it. It’s not like you have an option anyways,” Alvarez reminded him.

“I could run back to Cuba.”

“On what boat? The one they took? Look, maybe I’d have a different opinion if what they had you doing was wrong, but it’s not.”

Jack knew Alvarez was right, but still wasn’t even slightly inclined to go. The fact is he knew he ought to, though.

“They want me in Lauderdale on Wednesday,” Jack said. It was Saturday.

“Perfect. That gives you a half week to see Padre Santiago.” Alvarez was a devout Cuban Catholic and was Jackant that Jack see a priest before he goes, despite Jack not having gone to confession since he was eleven.

As Jack entered St. Dominic’s two days later, his eyes found relief in the darkness. The Monday sun was killing his eyes, and the church got him out of the brightness of the cloudless sky. Jack wanted to hide in the back, but Alvarez made him go to the altar rail in front of everyone. The Eucharist was in the monstrance, and Jack genuflected directly in front of it before kneeling on the altar rail just to the right of the center aisle. He prayed for courage. He asked St. George to pray for him and that he may be given the same courage St. George was given in his fight against the dragon. He then went to confession for a very long time, and said his also very long penance, and left the church.

The moon was bright the next night as they drove to Ft. Lauderdale in Alvarez’s car. His mind kept racing over all the training he had done since his arrest, and hoped he hadn’t forgotten anything during his two week leave. When they arrived, they were greeted by the friendly hotel concierge with a slight, but radiant smile. They were given their room key, paid for by the state, and headed to the elevator.

“I can’t handle it, Alvarez.”

“You’ve done more dangerous things before, I wouldn’t be worried. You didn’t have all these guys working on the *Romero* to be resistant to torpedoes, and yet you still tried throwing grenades at submarines.” Jack really did try to throw grenades into the escape hatches of submarines, but what he was going to do tomorrow was not less dangerous than that, and Alvarez said what he had knowing he was wrong.

‘Why did I say that?’ Alvarez thought to himself. ‘No one knows if he’s coming back from this, and I shouldn’t have lied to him like that. Only a man who hates his brother lies to him, and I just lied to a man who might be killed.’

The next morning when Jack entered Kennedy Space Center he was the most nervous he had ever been in his life. He was so inside his own head he almost ignored the President, who was thanking him for giving himself for the States. The President assured Jack that he would be a national hero for generations, but he didn’t hear it. As he slipped into his suit, the nervousness continued to build. The head engineer said everything would be fine, and that everything was thoroughly inspected throughout the entire production process, but when he put on his helmet, the nervousness culminated into tears, and he broke down. The man who had once been so heroic, so fearless, was now a former shadow of himself. He felt nothing but loneliness.

Walking to the launchpad, his eyes blurry from tears, a woman in a blue and white dress came to the railing of the walkway and begged him to come over. He hardly heard her, and could not see her through his tears. Nevertheless, a subconscious reaction had driven him to her. She grabbed his arm, taking him by surprise, and hugged him with a motherly tenderness. She saw his tears through the helmet, and whispered that her son was the chief engineer, and that he would be okay. A sudden peace came. He had no clue why this woman gave him so much confidence. He was now filled with a serious courage he had never felt before and walked with broad shoulders into the rocket.

As it made lift off, Alvarez, who had been watching all morning, saw a sizable panel fall from the side of the thruster. He wondered if that was meant to happen.