

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.

## Love You to the Moon (And Back?)

by **Laura Lee Cochran**

*One, two and buckle my shoe. Three, four shut the door.*

Shut the door....

Please don't come in....

I hold my hands up to my ears, my elbows resting on my knees, as I attempt to sing silly nursery rhymes in a means to calm myself down. Though, it proves to be unhelpful. My eyes blink, weary from the tears and my nose feels fuzzy like soda pop. The darkness surrounds me in the closet as a roaring chatter erupts from the hallway.

In the darkness, here, I should be safe, but I know it's just an illusion. Something to get me by before the full reality sets in. Before I have to face what I wish I didn't have to face.

Mom said I'd be safe. She told me before they even reached their hand to pick a name that there would be no chance of being chosen. But yet, it was my name spoken. It was my direction everyone's eyes drifted to. It was me.

I lift my forearm to wipe the tears from my eyes and the boogers dripping from my nose. An aching pain soars through my chest as each breath feels like a new stab wound. I try to look around the room, calm myself. A breath in, a breath out.

*Five, six, pick up sticks Seven, eight, lay them straight.*

Lay them straight...

I'll just tell them they can't make me leave. Let them know they picked the wrong person and to try again. But what if they won't listen? They probably won't listen. I need them to listen, please. *Please.*

“Elio?” a woman yells. “Come out please.”

“Where are you kid?” a man yells out.

“Honey,” I hear my mother call, “You need to come out.”

My cries transform into silent sobs. She can't expect me to come out, to walk into something that neither of us want to happen. So why then? Can't she fight for me? Can't she do something....anything? Just please don't join their side.

**KNOCK!**

The sound startles me so much a half sob half scream erupts out of me, blowing my cover. A fist must have hit the door, but before they hit again they begin fiddling with the closet door knob, moving it side to side. I back myself away, my head shaking in fear that they'll take me. They'll get me. They'll make me... “He's in here!” a man shouts.

“Well, then open the door,” a woman states.

The door handle moves frantically. My breath grows staggered until I have to close my eyes out of fear of anticipation. They're going to come in. They know where I am. Soon enough, they'll take me from my false sense of safety, but I'm not ready to go.

*Nine, ten, begin again.*

Again.

Please not again.

The knob finally stands still, chatter erupts in the hallway until a moment of silence overcomes it. Then:

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

Someone hits their body upon the door and then light pours in highlighting a man's silhouette standing in front of me. His hand reaches my way and I hold mine out hoping he'll leave me alone, but he instead grabs it and pulls me up out of the closet.

I hear claps and hoorays as I feel a pair of arms surround me.

“Oh Elio!” My mother cries. “You can't run from this, you're our new lasting hope!”

She nuzzles her head in my neck as I reach my hand up to rub my puffy eyes.

There he stands, the one who called my name to the audience. The one who took my destiny into his own hands. The commander.

“Everyone, step back. I know you’re all curious as to what this means for a child to be chosen, but nonetheless, we must continue as our tradition states,” the commander says, moving his hands to clear a path, “So please step back so we can discuss this in private.”

My mother stands and grabs ahold of my hand, her hand is like ice. I look up to her, her skin pale and her eyes red and puffy. But, she holds a smile, trying to relax me. My eyes drift down to her hand in mine, her nails painted a cosmic blue, and her grip causes a throbbing in my finger tips.

The commander begins to lead us down the silver hallway to the room where it all happened. Where they called my name out of everyone else on the ship, to be sent away for the hope of humanity.

As we walk, a crowd of strangers lines the hallway as if they are giving me a send off.

Each face I pass tells the same thing. Whether it’s an eyebrow furrowed, a tear in their eye or a frown so deep it could be permanent: their faces read the same. “*Hey kid, you’re a goner*” But what I hear is:

“Thank you for your service!”

“You are doing a good thing for us all!”

“You’re our lasting hope.”

“I’m so proud!”

The cheers and thanksgiving of the people around me becomes suffocating. I follow my mother, my hand still in hers, wishing she would let go out of embarrassment, but also that she would never let go in fear I may never be able to hold her hand again.

Then, in the hallway, when I get a view out of the window of the ship. It’s large, encasing the galaxy around us as stars dance around in a field of purple. It sings to me of a freedom from all of this, yet I know the moment I go, it won’t be for what I want, but for what they want.

I turn back to my mother, and just like that we are walking into the door as it’s shut promptly behind us. The commander stands, a sense of authority that makes me feel small in comparison.

“Well, what a day this is Elio,” The commander smiles. “It’s an honor to have you serve our people. I’m sure it must come as a shock to you both seeing he’s so young-”

“A shock?” my mother asks. “A shock is an understatement. He’s only twelve you know?”

The commander’s shoulders fall in defeat as his eyes meet mine and slowly drift away. My mother’s hand leaves mine, finally allowing me to find feeling in them again. She then

crosses her arms in front of her chest, her hand frequently moving to wipe away a tear.

“I know,” he sighs. “It’s bittersweet to send someone so young to the mission. But as you know, we are desperate for someone to be the light for change here for the people on our ship.” Sure, desperate for some sick and twisted hope in a plan that he fails to understand is unreachable.

My mother stands up straight, “I suppose you’re right. It is an honor for Elio to be the future face of change.”

Face of change? They have to be joking. This is pointless. All hope is...gone. There is no change that can come from me, only the affirmation that this mission is nothing more than a disguise for the sole fact that none of us know what we are doing. Apparently lying to the people sounds more appealing.

“Well,” I start, as both the commander and my mother’s eyes shoot towards my direction, “I don’t really see how this is fair for me.”

The commander and my mother share a glance, a shared understanding.

*“This boy’s much too young to understand”*

I do understand, and it’s not fair.

“Listen Elio,” the commander starts. He walks away from the door and further into the conference room. Chairs are aligned perfectly in line throughout the room as cascading metal sculptures of the galaxy hang from the ceiling. Everything is a crisp silver and white, except for a single door that stands in the corner painted in a bright red with the words *LAUNCH* written on it. He stops, looking at the door, his hands resting on his hips and he turns with his head shaking.

“We can’t stay here on the ship forever. We’ve known this,” he says as he begins to pace. “Each launch we send is for a greater good of the future civilization we form. The ship isn’t meant to last, but the moon, the moon holds hope for us all.

“What if I don’t care about the moon?” I ask

“Then you don’t care about humanity,” the commander retorts.

We stand there, with our eyes locked as a suffocating silence devours the room. It’s like we’re in this game: who will give up first.

Save humanity this, sacrifice me that. I knew my fate the moment they called my name. They are desperate for a way off this ship, to start a new life. So they send someone to the moon each year to test if it’s possible, livable. But the trick is, they never come back.

“But what about me?” I ask. “I know...” before I can continue, a cry seeps out. “I know everyone who’s ever been sent hasn’t come back. But I want to come back.”

My mother drops to her knees to my level and holds my face in her hands, despair written all over her face. She’s heartbroken knowing what awaits me, but there, in the sparkle of her eye, I see that she won’t see my death as pointless. She doesn’t see the unfairness. She truly believes I am going to be the ship’s salvation.

I hear footsteps approach me as the commander also stoops to my level.

“Listen kid,” he says, reaching his hand out to rest on my shoulder. “I know this may not seem fair, and nothing I can say will make it seem any less fair. But the rules are set for a reason, the tradition has continued for way before you were even born. Earth is inhabitable, and our last and final hope is building civilization on the moon. You’ll have a home to live in while you’re there and when...” he pauses, averting his eyes from me, “*If* you make it past a whole year, you’ll return here allowing us to prepare to set up base on the moon.”

“So, I’m just some big science experiment?” I ask, anger festering inside me.

“Elio,” the commander stresses, “You are a soldier for the cause,” he says, holding our honorary salute with a fist at the collarbone.

He stands and my mother quickly follows. The commander begins walking towards the red door and my mother and I quickly follow suit. By the door, a large button sits in a glass case on the wall. The commander raises it and slowly presses the button, opening a compartment underneath and swiftly pulls out an orange spacesuit, backpack, and helmet.

I stand there, unfazed as my mother and the commander strap me into what feels like my burial clothes in complete silence. This can’t be happening...This has to be some horrible dream.

*One two, buckle my shoe.*

My mother straps the velcro on my clunky boots. The commander slips on my gloves and then, the commander and my mother are standing above me looking down. My mother’s face has turned into a sense of pride, but the commander has become solemn, as if his hope in me is short lived.

“Okay,” the commander starts. “You may say your goodbyes.”

He walks over to the door and lays his hand on a lever with my helmet in his other hand. He looks off into the distance, giving my mother and I privacy. She stoops down to me again, holding my shoulders.

“Remember what I always tell you?” she starts, adjusting the collar of my spacesuit. “I

love you to the moon and back,” she smiles.

“What if I don’t come back,” I sob, finally letting reality settle in.

“I’ll still love you to the moon,” my mother says, with tears welling up in her eyes.

I may never see my mom again. No one has ever returned, everyone knew what it meant when they were chosen, but why is this our reality? Why is our only hope in a stupid rock that revolves around the very planet that failed us decades ago? I don’t want to leave my mother. I don’t want to leave the ship. Why can’t the ship be enough, we’ve survived on it this long?

Why is seeking after a false hope more of a priority than my life?

Do I not matter?

Is hope more important?

My mother gives me one last hug, her smell of cinnamon radiating the air around me. I wish I could never let go.

*Don’t let go.*

The commander opens the door, ending the last moments I’ll have with my mother. She stands, her hand resting on my shoulder. The commander moves his hand for me to enter. Through the door is the inside of rocket connected to the outer parts of our ship. It illuminates blue with all of its high tech buttons and gadgets.

“Don’t worry about getting there,” the commander says. “We have it all set for you, you just need to hit the red button once you’ve strapped in.”

Slowly, I make my way into what feels like my coffin as my mother’s hand slips from my shoulder. I pass the commander, who stands tall, looking above me, not even man enough to look me in the eyes. With one step in and one step out, I turn back to my mother.

“I’ll love you to the moon...” I say, taking a moment to think. This may feel like a funeral. This may feel like I’m a goner and it’s all over for me, but that doesn’t mean it has to be. I’m terrified, outside of my wits horrified about what it means to be sent to the moon. But I’m not going to hold on to a hope for our stupid ship, I’m going to hold on to a hope that I’ll be able to see my mother again. That I will be the first to return.

“And back,” I state.

A smile creeps softly across my mothers lips. She gives me a slight nod and raises her hand for a salute. I return the salute and turn back to fully enter the rocket.

*Three, four shut the door.*

The door shuts behind me. Without turning back, without looking again, I take my seat. I want to remember my mother with her smile, with her salute towards me knowing she's counting on me. I want that image ingrained in my mind when I feel like giving up, when I think it's all hopeless. Next thing I know, I'm strapping myself into my seat as my hand lays over the red button. Then, the commander's voice sounds off over the intercom.

"May your trip to the moon grant freedom for all," he says.

A tear falls down my cheek. I want freedom for myself. Is that too much to ask?

I shake my head as my hand hits the button. Lights flash and all of a sudden I'm taking off into the galaxy.

Purple and blue intertwine into vibrant streams of starlike spirals. Stars flash by in a haze and planets seem to grow larger and larger the faster the rocket flies through the solar system. The rocket shakes me here and there as I see balls of comet fire passing by leaving trails of light behind. The universe seems to be in this elegant dance of harmony and peace. As the colors transcend my own understanding, I wonder why we ever just lived on earth in the first place when all of this was possible.

Through the window, I see the small moon illuminating a new sense of hope that I will return. I will come back. Even though at the rate I'm moving, the moon seems to only grow in size by an inch. I'll live on the moon and show it can be done. I will be the face of change like everyone thought before, but I will actually conquer it.

In the middle of my trance, a voice in the rocket shouts DANGER. Warning signs go up on the screens speaking of a malfunction. Red flashes all around as a siren sings of an inevitable doom. The rocket begins to shake me violently, causing a dizziness to form in my head. This can't be happening. I return to my nursery rhymes to calm myself down.

*Five, six, pick up sticks Seven, eight, lay them straight.*

CRASH! Something explodes and heat begins to radiate inside the rocket. Fire, I register, there's a fire! Screams erupt from my lungs; screams I never knew I was capable of.

I'm not making it to the moon...am I?

My mother...I think of her watching this all from outside the window.

I know I won't make it to the moon, but I hope she knows, I love her to the moon anyway.

*Nine, ten...never to begin again.*

The End.