

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.

[untitled]

by **Thomas Ernstberger**

Ethan grasped feverishly at the arms of his seat as the pit of his stomach lurched to the back of his throat. The shuttle rattled and screamed as it climbed higher into the sky, as the deafening roar of the thrusters cloaked the sounds of his protest. Garbled speech from the ground tuned over the radio yet Ethan could barely understand him let alone talk back. He had to make a geologic effort to turn his head under the weight of the ascending spacecraft and only then could he see out of the viewport next to him. The world he had called home fell away from him the longer he looked; first he could see every detail of the world around him, but it rapidly disappeared under a smothering darkness. It had started on the curve of the earth to his right and spread across the entire world from his vantage. Coal black fingers raked their malignant talons across land and sky draining all life and color in a mere instant.

The communication over the radio juttet out in short bursts until the only sound came from the dull roar of the thrusters. Ethan could not bring himself to look forward, to meet the repugnant Eye of God staring straight through him. To look upon the union of stars and moon was to bring its attention to anyone who dared. Then he knew the world no longer felt the caress of sunlight, instead true darkness swallowed the land and horror reigned on Earth. Shadowy things, eyeless things from inky black pools, creatures garbed as men, crawling behemoths, and more creatures from the deepest pits of Hell are heralded by its arrival.

His blood ran cold and pooled at his feet as his mind wandered back to his first memory of the darkness. They had traveled so far after their home had burned down, his mother had him in her arms, she had looked so tired then but still kind. He could remember the birds all at once flying into the air screeching and flying as fast as they could and her face turning pale as death. His memories became hazy after that he only remembered sounds and darkness, snapping branches, laughter, a hideous tune, screaming. The next thing he remembered was he had been cloistered in a small cave and his mother was gone.

A sudden jolt tore him out of his memories as the thrusters of the shuttle slowed. Now the entire landscape was obscured, and he found himself in a lightless chasm devoid of sound unable to tell up from down if it were not for the Eye. Finally, as the shuttle began to slow as the scientists said it would, he could feel the strength enough to turn his head to the forward glass. His courage died in his throat as he choked out a scream upon meeting its gaze.

His mind could not wrap around its scale, it filled his entire vision, incandescent trails of fire larger than mountains coiled around its rim and suffocated in its embrace. Beams of pale red mist light cascaded around the Eye in every direction like trails of blood yet avoided the Earth like a puddle in the street. But Ethan barely noticed, he could feel it, he was never sure if this thing was truly alive, but he knew now. It was staring at him; he could feel a pressure greater than any he had suffered getting to this point. His limbs would not respond under the screaming of his mind to turn the shuttle around his fingers would not even twitch. Sweat froze to his forehead and his lungs felt they were filled with cement.

All he could do was stare, he somehow knew that if he took his eyes off it then it would be the death of him, whether it be from his heart giving out or it attacking him he could not say. He felt like that scared child crawling out from that cave again, not the man who had survived for 36 years where so many others had died. The Eye knew this as well as memories of his weakness flooded into his mind. The restless nights running through shadowed woods while dead things called out his name, friends lost in the bowels of the Earth, the blood of people only trying to help him stain his hands.

He was not a good man, not someone deserving of anything but loathing as the scared boy who ran from everything. He never should have let them talk him into this, it was foolish to think they could do anything from the start. Yet he supposed since he met Kara, he had always been a fool, she made him act that way. He had never known much love; life was cheap in his world and people seldom showed love in fear of losing it when the Eye came. Yet as he was dying in the dirt, she had appeared with golden sunbeams coursing through her auburn hair. When he had regained consciousness, she was sitting over him dressing his wounds in a peculiar town, the smile she gave him stayed with him still.

They had shown him compassion unlike he had ever seen before, they lived with more vigor than anyone he had ever met. Each of them had a story and all of them listened to him. Yet they did not despise him, Kara had told him what he had lived by for the past few years “A better tomorrow is forward.” He had learned how to hope from her, and he could have sworn to do anything to make her happy.

Finally, his mind returned to him as he continued to stare at the Eye, for how long he was staring he could never have told you. He was closer to the Eye now; he could see that

clearly now, but the pressure in his lungs subsided and the blood began to flow through his stiff limbs once more. Kara's words rang loudly in his head as he piloted the shuttle forward to the tears in the universe. The shuttle, near two hundred feet, dwarfed Ethans entire body yet was truly an infinitesimal speck lost in the background of the cosmos. Now at this distance the columns of fire seemed to dance like tortured souls writhing to be free only to crash back down onto each other like a sea of fire.

The moon was gone and the sun as well, enveloped in the churning black ichor that seemed to ooze out of the Eye at this distance. Carefully, the shuttle stopped at the edge Ethan, now removed from his trance became acutely aware of his weightlessness. The door to nowhere loomed around him in every direction encompassing every aspect of his perception. There was something in there.

It coiled unto itself stretching from the surface of the moon to infinity in the void, screaming wordless like it had lost its voice before time began. It spasmed at every twist, clawed vestiges of hands grasping at bands of shadow. It latched onto the moon with appendages coiling on its surface. Ethan saw this and a faint spark of realization panned through his mind. Suddenly, the only word that flooded his mind in a chorus of rasping chants "Offering" it said to him.

He grasped at his head in sudden pain and fell to the shuttle floor hard, his vision blurred from the sudden headache, and he fought with all his might not to vomit in his suit. He grabbed onto the seat for support and hoisted himself up feeling his knees wobble at the effort. Ethan tried to keep the tremble out of his voice as he said, "Will my world be safe, will the sunshine on it again?" He was not sure if the creature could hear or even understand him, but it felt right to say it aloud. His heart roared in his ears and fingers shook frantically as he waited for this parasite to reply. The chorus spat out in kind, "For a time" in a sickly sounding tone which rang through his mind.

Ethan let out a long sigh and the weight was suddenly thrown out of his mind. He called out more assuredly now, "End your influence and I give myself to you!" The creature could only so happily oblige, the Eye fell away as suddenly as it came. If he had not covered his eyes, he would have gone blind from the drastic difference in light. Striations of resplendent sunlight cut through space and touched the Earth like gentle fingers. From up here he found it even harder to comprehend the Earth's beauty than the Eye's malice. Cascading mountains, rolling hills, rivers like veins dancing across the surface, vast oceans, plains full of grass, and he finally understood what Kara saw as beautiful in the world. He only wished he could have realized it sooner.

The creature looked much smaller now, not cloaked in its darkness. A twisted malformed thing, he could only wonder where it came from. As the sun passed the moon its coiled form reached out for the shuttle in an almost tender embrace. Ethan knew he could not destroy this thing; it was something born out of the darkness between the stars, but he could get it as far away as possible.

Right before its coiling head wrapped around the shuttle, Ethan threw down the lever and sent all his remaining fuel to the thrusters. Before it could react, the shuttle caught it at its base as Ethan crashed it headlong into the creature. He lurched forward and heard a myriad of alarms but still held down the lever as the resistance from the creature started to give way. Its perpetually coiling limbs wrapped around the shuttle and locked it in place as it frantically tried to free itself. He saw it rip and claw at the moon rock trying to restabilize itself, but the power of the engines made it difficult to grab anything. It screamed in a thousand voices of protest, but he ignored them all and finally with a sudden give the moon was far behind him.

Before he lost sight of it, he caught a glimpse of the Earth. Bathing in a warm glow, he was glad the first thing she saw after the Eye was gone was light. She deserved that much comfort after what he put her through. But she will be fine now they can finally get their good tomorrow if he kept moving forward. Ethan held down the lever even after the fuel was spent, never taking his eyes off Earth.