

Chapter 1: Artemis II

The beast towered over them, its spine clutched by the launch tower. Evelyn stared. Her lips parted a breath's width. The Saturn VI rocket was ready. She was not.

"Evie?" came the voice through the receiver.

Evelyn turned back to face her mom. She wiped away a small smudge and placed her hand up against the glass.

"Evie... Please be careful."

"I will."

Evelyn didn't want to say it. She didn't want to acknowledge the cancer. Her mother's eyes saw her sigh.

"Mom. Don't die. Please?"

"My little munchkin. I'll survive the two months. I'm too stubborn to die."

"Guess I know where my stubborn streak comes from," Evelyn forced a laugh as she leaned back in the chair. She didn't want to show how scared she was.

"Evie. If—"

"Mom! Don't say that."

"Listen. If . . . If I am not here when you get back. Promise you won't be too stubborn to live."

"You'll be here."

Jacqueline Meyers looked at her daughter with a lifetime's worth of affection and a little more. She whispered, "I'll be here. I'm so proud of you." A small tear rolled down the valley of wrinkles and wisdom carved on her face. Her cheekbones stuck out stubbornly, skin taut.

"I love you munchkin."

"Love you too."

Evelyn didn't dare look back, lest her heart keep her chained to Earth.

She looked in the next Goodbye Room. That's what the astronauts called the private rooms where they said their farewells to their loved ones through a glass pane. This made sure their quarantine wasn't voided at the last minute.

Joe was cackling. His wife was laughing too. Evelyn stood just out of sight and peeked around the door frame.

"Don't do anything stupid, okay? I *mean* it, Joe!"

"Define stupid," Joe grinned.

"You know damn well what I mean Joseph Amos Argenton," she shot back, her voice trembling but warm.

Evelyn walked past the next room. Sofia's sister offered steady reassurances, though her hand was pressed firmly against the glass, jaw tensed.

Daniel was already in the prep room.

Evelyn spoke first. "She. She didn't come?"

He shook his head. "Didn't expect her to. One can hope but always expect the worst."

Daniel looked up and gave a poor smile.

Evelyn patted his shoulder, unsure of herself. "Cheer up Danny. Once she sees you, and us, up there," she pointed up to where she imagined the Moon was, "she will change her mind. I mean, we're the first to live on a freaking Moon base!"

A dry chuckle is all she got in response.

Sofia and Joe joined them, and they finalized getting prepped.

Joe piped in, "Time for the suit rats to come!"

The suit rats—the technicians who helped the astronauts to don their suits—ran a final check on all their suits and connected their life support systems to the portable oxygen suitcases.

The neon-red clock struck T -3 hours. It was time to climb onto the back of the beast.

Evelyn was blinded by the flashes when they stepped out of the narrow corridor. Not since Apollo 11 twelve years ago had there been such a media frenzy. She could hear only muted shouts and questions.

The suit rats toting the backup oxygen suitcase followed them into the Astrovan. She took long, deep breaths, languishing in the moment.

Her mother's dulling blue eyes danced in front of her; a ghost reflected on the inside of her visor. She squeezed her eyelids together hard and shook her head. Her fingers drummed on the collar where the helmet snapped into the rest of the suit.

Across her, Sofia sat up straight, her thumbs touching each finger in a rhythmic, nervous dance. Their eyes locked, and Sofia flashed a confident smile. Evelyn gave her an "OK" hand signal. They'd be able to talk once their comms were connected to the rocket.

Joe was throwing fake punches at Daniel. She couldn't see his face, but Evelyn could feel the scowl radiating from within the cumbersome, white suit.

They all fumbled for the handholds as the driver made the last turn to the launch tower.

Rather crash now than up there, Evelyn thought.

They piled out of the van and got into the elevator. It was a long ride up.

The slumbering beast was waking. As they rode up, the rocket's size grew. It was a sight they had seen before, but standing right next to it was striking. Cold gas puffed out like a dragon's breath.

Evelyn could see Joe's lips move. She couldn't hear him, but she smiled, imagining him say, "Oh, Mama! That's a huge hunka metal."

The black and white stripes of the Saturn VI rocket flashed past them as they ascended to the top of the crew access arm. The elevator clunked to a stop, and the door opened.

They shuffled out towards the gaping hatch. Technicians in white easter bunny suits, minus the fluffy ears, stood at the ready.

One at a time they were bundled into the claustrophobic space and strapped into their seats. Faces toward the heavens, they heard the muffled click and clang as the hatch was sealed. Earth was now distant.

"Smell the roses while you can chaps!" Joe said.

"Roses? We had different things for breakfast then," Sofia quipped.

Evelyn heard, pay no heed to the banter. "This is it," she thought. "No turning back now."

She sat motionless. Her mind drifted, and her neck strained to glimpse the outside world. She could only see a guillotine of gloomy clouds hung over them.

"Artemis, Houston."

"Houston, this is Artemis." Evelyn refocused and went through the last items on the checklist.

"T minus two hours, 13 minutes." Daniel called out.

"Plenty of time for some I Spy. Whatcha say Evie?" Joe asked.

The next two hours dragged out and flew by. Evelyn was fascinated by those hours just before launch. Those hours sitting atop a controlled explosion, waiting for millions of parts to fire on time, hundreds of thousands of lines of code to run, tons of fuel to burn, and a plethora of checklist items—it all seemed to fire her primal self. A fight for survival. One that was out of her hands. Her survival, the survival of her whole crew, lay in the work of tens of thousands of people she hadn't even met.

She breathed to calm her twitching fingers.

"Final checks, everyone. Joe?"

"All good and green like grandma's Christmas tree."

"Soph?"

"Systems look good. Propellant looks good."

"Daniel?"

"Everything nominal Commander."

Mission Control crackled onto the transmission. "Artemis, flight director is polling for launch. Confirm your status."

Evelyn cleared her throat. "Crew and vehicle are go for launch, Houston."

"Copy that. T minus 15 minutes."

Evelyn closed her eyes. Distant thunder rumbled in her chest. It felt close. Too close. *Please God, let us go.*

Her heart wouldn't bear saying goodbye to her mother again. The launch had already been scrubbed twice as it was. She held her breath.

"Artemis, this is Houston. Flight says GO for launch. Repeat, we are GO for launch."

"Copy Houston. A-firm, GO for launch," she said, her shoulders easing in their restraints.

Joe whooped. "Let's get this 4th of July party on the road!"

The tension grew. Daniel rubbed his gloved hands together. Joe polished a spot on his visor. Sofia ran her fingers across the dials again and again. Evelyn tapped the seam of her suit.

"T minus 50 seconds. Artemis, you are internal power. God speed."

"Copy Houston. Thanks for the send-off. Get the cake ready for when we get back."

Joe, sat all the way at the back, said, "A joke? From Evie? My God we are screwed, aren't we?"

All four crew members chuckled, before falling silent again. It was time.

"T minus 20 seconds. Guidance is internal."

Evelyn's chest rose and fell. She clenched her jaw and crossed her arms across her chest. Her vision narrowed. She could feel the rocket come alive. A low rumble reverbed through the cockpit.

Mission Control sounded out the countdown.

"T minus 10, 9, ignition sequence start, six, five, four, thee, two, one... Zero. All engines running! Liftoff! We have liftoff of Artemis II."

Everything shook. The crew were pinned into their seats. 3 G's of acceleration made their breaths labored, their limbs heavy.

The rocket streaked across the sky like a dragon bleeding gold.

Exhaust plumes blasted against the atmosphere as the five engines pushed and shoved the marvel of man out of gravity's grasp and into the dark sky.

"Everyone good?" Evelyn grunted.

"Still kickin'," Joe said between rattling teeth.

"Cabin still looking good." The other two agreed.

Mission Control spoke. "Artemis, Houston. Go for staging. First stage cutoff at T plus 2 minutes 48 seconds. In three, two, one... Cutoff?"

They had a moment of silence after the first stage engines shut down. The startup of the second stage shattered the silence.

After 6 more minutes of burning, the second stage shutdown. One last burn of the third stage put them in a parking orbit.

Evelyn ran her eyes across the gauges and dials.

"Houston, Artemis. All parameters nominal. Looking good for TLI."

"Copy Artemis. We see the same thing. Stand by for Translunar Injection maneuver in two and a half hours."

"Evie?" Joe's voice was a whisper.

"What?"

"We've got a problem. It's Daniel..."