

# **The Loneliest Mile**

**By Unknown Author**

\*\*Genre:\*\* Science Fiction

## **Chapter 1: The First Pioneer**

\*\*Scene 1: The launch sequence begins at ...\*\*

\*\*Scene 1: The launch sequence begins at Cape Kennedy\*\*

The observation glass felt cold against Sarah's palm, though the Florida sun had been beating against it since dawn. Below, the Saturn V stood wreathed in vapor, ice crystals cascading from its flanks like a waterfall frozen in reverse. Somewhere inside that tower of metal and fuel, three hundred feet above the launchpad, Bobby sat strapped into a capsule designed for a body that would never grow taller than four feet.

"T-minus ten minutes and counting."

The voice crackled through the control room speakers with the flat affect of a man reading a grocery list. Sarah's fingers curled against the glass. Behind her, the room hummed with controlled chaos--engineers monitoring readouts, technicians speaking in the clipped language of acronyms and numbers. The air conditioning couldn't quite mask the smell of coffee gone bitter in its pot, cigarette smoke, and something else. Fear, maybe. Or guilt.

"Biometric readings are nominal," someone reported. "Heart rate elevated but within acceptable parameters."

Sarah closed her eyes. She could picture him up there, his small dark fingers moving through the pre-flight checklist they'd practiced ten thousand times. Touch the oxygen gauge. Check. Touch the attitude indicator. Check. The custom restraints would be snug across his chest, designed to keep him secure during the violence of ascent. She'd watched them fit him for those straps. He'd signed \*tight\* and \*okay\* and given her that expression--the one that looked almost like a smile.

"Dr. Chen." Mission Director Kellerman's voice cut through her thoughts. "We need you at the communications station."

She turned from the window. Kellerman stood with his arms crossed, his face carved from the same granite as the blockhouse walls. Everything about him was hard angles and sharp edges--the crew cut, the jaw, the eyes that never quite met hers when they discussed the mission timeline.

"Of course." Sarah smoothed her skirt and crossed to the communications console, where a television monitor showed the capsule's interior camera. There he was. Bobby. His face filled the screen, dark eyes alert beneath the custom helmet. He was looking directly at the camera.

Directly at her.

She lifted her hands where he could see them through his own monitor, signing slowly: \*Ready?\*

His response came immediately, his fingers moving with the precision she'd drilled into him since he was small enough to cradle in her arms. \*Ready. Go moon.\*

Five years. Had it really been only five years since they'd brought him to her--a infant chimpanzee with eyes too intelligent for comfort, plucked from his mother at birth? She remembered the weight of him, the way his tiny fingers had gripped her thumb with surprising strength. The lab had smelled of disinfectant and desperation. The Cold War was eating through budgets and ethics alike, and the Soviets had already put a dog in orbit. A dog that died up there, though they hadn't admitted it for years.

"We need a win, Dr. Chen," her supervisor had said, placing Bobby in her arms. "We need it soon. Teach him everything."

\*Everything.\* But not \*permanent.\* Not \*never.\* Not \*goodbye.\*

"T-minus five minutes."

The room's energy shifted, tightening like a drawn breath. Sarah watched Bobby on the monitor as he continued his checks. His movements were calm, methodical. She'd trained him well. Perhaps too well. He trusted her completely, and she had used that trust to prepare him for a mission whose true parameters she could only guess at.

The rescue timeline had changed three times in the past month. First it was six months. Then a year. Last week, Kellerman had stopped mentioning it altogether.

"All stations, report status."

One by one, the stations called out: FIDO, GUIDO, CAPCOM, SURGEON. All green. All systems

go. The machine was ready to hurl her friend into the void.

"Dr. Chen, we need confirmation of subject compliance."

\*Subject.\* Not Bobby. Never Bobby in the official reports.

She signed again: \*Feel good?\*

Bobby's response made her chest constrict. \*Sarah proud?\*

Her hands trembled as she formed the words: \*Very proud.\*

"T-minus one minute."

The room fell silent except for the countdown and the whisper of ventilation systems. Sarah's reflection stared back at her from the darkened monitor beside Bobby's feed--a woman in her thirties with dark hair pulled back too tight, eyes that hadn't slept properly in weeks. When had she started looking so haunted?

"Thirty seconds."

Bobby's hands moved again. \*See you soon.\*

Sarah's throat closed. She managed to sign: \*See you soon.\*

It was a lie. She knew it was a lie. But what else could she give him?

"Ten... nine... eight..."

The numbers fell like hammer blows. Sarah found herself back at the observation window, her palm pressed against the glass as if she could somehow reach through it, across the distance, and pull him back.

"Three... two... one..."

"Ignition."

The world turned white. Even through the reinforced glass, the light was blinding. Then the sound hit--not heard but \*felt\*, a physical force that rattled teeth and bones and the very foundations of the building. The Saturn V lifted, impossibly slow at first, then faster, riding a pillar of fire that turned night into day.

Sarah's hand slid down the glass, leaving a streak of condensation. She watched the rocket climb, accelerating, punching through a thin layer of clouds that scattered like frightened birds. In seconds it was just a bright point of light, a new star rising in the wrong direction.

"Separation confirmed. Second stage ignition successful."

Kellerman appeared at her shoulder. "Excellent work, Dr. Chen. Phase one complete."

She didn't look at him. Couldn't look at him. Her eyes stayed fixed on that distant point of light carrying Bobby away from everything he'd ever known, toward a destination where no rescue ship

waited because--she was certain now--none was planned.

"You should celebrate," Kellerman said. "This is a historic moment."

"Yes," Sarah whispered. "Historic."

The light disappeared into the blue, leaving only empty sky and the fading thunder of engines. Somewhere up there, Bobby was experiencing weightlessness for the first time, seeing the curve of the Earth, alone with the stars and the lie she'd helped sell him.

\*See you soon.\*

The words echoed in her mind, hollow as the sky.

Behind her, someone popped a champagne cork.

\*\*Scene 2: A flashback to three years ear...\*\*

\*\*Scene 2: A flashback to three years earlier\*\*

The observation room smelled of disinfectant and stale coffee, a combination Sarah would forever associate with the beginning of everything. Through the one-way mirror, Bobby sat in the center of a white-tiled chamber, methodically stacking colored blocks into a tower that would inevitably fall. He was smaller then--barely four years old--his dark eyes sharp with concentration beneath a prominent brow.

Sarah pressed her palm against the glass, watching him work.

"He's arranged them by weight, not color," she said. "See? Heaviest at the bottom."

Dr. Marcus Webb didn't look up from his clipboard. The behavioral psychologist had the perpetually tired expression of a man who'd seen too many failed experiments. "Instinct. Structural stability. You're anthropomorphizing."

"Am I?" Sarah gathered her materials--flash cards, a stopwatch, a notebook already half-filled with observations Marcus had dismissed. "We'll see."

The chamber door hissed as she entered. Bobby's head snapped toward her, the tower forgotten. In three years, Sarah would recognize this exact expression--alert, curious, expectant--transmitted across 240,000 miles of void. But now, in this sterile room that tried so hard to look friendly with its primary-colored toys and cheerful murals, she simply smiled and sat cross-legged on the floor.

Bobby knuckle-walked closer, stopping just outside arm's reach. Cautious.

"Good morning," Sarah said, then brought her hand to her chin and moved it forward. \*Good morning.\* She repeated the gesture, slower.

Bobby tilted his head. Behind the mirror, she knew Marcus was watching, pen poised. They'd tried this with three other chimps. None had progressed beyond basic mimicry of food-related signs.

Sarah touched her chest. \*Sarah.\* She pointed at Bobby, then made a questioning gesture with her palms up.

For a long moment, nothing. Bobby's eyes tracked from her hands to her face and back again. Then, with a deliberateness that made Sarah's breath catch, he touched his own chest and looked at her expectantly.

"Bobby," she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. She made the sign--a 'B' hand-shape tapped twice against her chest.

Bobby's fingers fumbled through the approximation. His hands weren't built for the precision of ASL, but the intent was unmistakable. He touched his chest again, made the sign, then pointed at her with a questioning grunt.

Sarah's vision blurred. She blinked rapidly, professional enough not to cry in front of her subject, human enough that it was a near thing. She touched her chest and signed her name.

Bobby repeated it. \*Sarah.\*

Then he did something that would later fill three pages of her incident report and cause Marcus to request a full psychological evaluation--of Sarah, not Bobby. He picked up a red block, held it out to her, and very clearly signed: \*What?\*

The observation room intercom crackled. "Dr. Chen, please maintain protocol. You're not supposed to teach interrogatives until week six."

Sarah ignored it. She took the block, feeling its weight in her palm, and signed: \*Red. Block.\*

Bobby's hand shot out, grabbing a blue block. \*What?\*

\*Blue. Block.\*

A yellow one. \*What?\*

\*Yellow. Block.\*

Bobby dropped the yellow block and picked up the red one again. He held it close to his chest, then signed with his free hand: \*Bobby. Red. Block.\*

"Jesus Christ," Marcus's voice came through the intercom, stripped of its usual skepticism. "Is he... is he constructing sentences?"

Sarah couldn't answer. Bobby was already moving, gathering blocks, bringing them to her one by one. \*What? What? What?\* His signs grew more insistent, more excited. When she signed the colors, he'd repeat them, then immediately grab another block, another toy, pointing at the murals on the walls, at her watch, at the observation window.

\*What? What? What?\*

The world had just opened for him, and he wanted to know everything.

Two hours later, Sarah sat in Marcus's office, her hands trembling slightly as she accepted the coffee he offered. Through the window, she could see Bobby in his habitat, signing to himself as he examined a rubber ball.

"He's asking questions," Marcus said, still staring at his notes. "Not requesting. Not demanding. \*Asking.\*"

"Yes."

"In three years of primate language studies, we've never documented spontaneous interrogative formation." He set down his pen. "Dr. Chen, do you understand what this means?"

Sarah watched Bobby through the window. He'd noticed her and was signing: \*Sarah. What?\* He held up the ball.

She tapped on the glass, signed back: \*Ball.\*

Bobby nodded--actually nodded--and returned to his examination.

"It means," Sarah said quietly, "that we're not teaching him tricks. We're teaching him language."

"It means the mission is viable." Marcus's voice carried a weight that made Sarah turn from the window. "If he can learn to ask questions, he can learn to answer them. Report conditions. Describe malfunctions. He's not just a biological payload anymore, Sarah. He's a potential astronaut."

Something cold settled in Sarah's stomach. "He's four years old."

"He's a chimpanzee. They mature faster than humans." Marcus stood, gathering his files. "I'm recommending we accelerate the timeline. If he's this responsive now, imagine what he'll be capable

of in two years. Three."

"Marcus--"

"This is what we've been working toward. What you've been working toward." He paused at the door. "Unless you're having second thoughts about the project?"

Through the window, Bobby had abandoned the ball. He was sitting with his back against the wall, signing to himself. Sarah recognized the gestures: \*Sarah. Bobby. Good morning. Red. Blue. Yellow.\* Practicing. Remembering.

"No," she heard herself say. "No second thoughts."

But as Marcus left and she returned to the observation room, watching Bobby sign his way through his new vocabulary with the joy of a child discovering words for the first time, Sarah felt the first hairline crack form in her certainty.

Bobby looked up, saw her, and signed: \*Sarah. More?\*

She pressed her hand against the glass. \*Tomorrow,\* she signed. \*More tomorrow.\*

Bobby touched his palm to the glass opposite hers, matching her gesture. Then he made a sign she hadn't taught him, couldn't have taught him--a simple pressing of both hands to his chest, the universal gesture that transcended species.

He was trying to tell her something. Something that didn't have a sign yet.

Sarah would spend the next three years teaching him thousands of words. But she would never quite capture whatever it was Bobby had tried to express in that moment, with the inadequate vocabulary of a single afternoon and the infinite complexity of a mind just learning it had questions the world might not want to answer.

In the hallway outside, she could hear Marcus already on the phone with Washington, his voice bright with the possibility of success. Sarah stayed at the window until the facility lights dimmed for evening, watching Bobby arrange his blocks by color now, now that he had the words to distinguish them.

\*What?\* he signed to the empty air. \*What? What? What?\*

She would teach him so much. But there were some words--\*permanent\*, \*never\*, \*alone\*--that her superiors had already told her to avoid. Some questions that, even as she taught him to ask them, she knew she'd never be allowed to answer.

\*\*Scene 3: Back in present-day mission co...\*\*

\*\*Scene 3: Back in present-day mission control\*\*

The fluorescent lights in Mission Control hummed with a frequency that made Sarah's temples ache. She'd been awake for thirty-six hours, running final communication drills with Bobby, and now the classified briefing folder in her hands felt heavier than it should.

She flipped through the pages again, her finger tracing the rescue mission timeline. Launch plus

eighteen months. She turned to the previous revision, dated three weeks earlier. Launch plus twenty-four months. Another page back. Launch plus thirty-six months.

The numbers were moving in the wrong direction.

Sarah's coffee had gone cold in its Styrofoam cup, a brown ring staining the rim where her lipstick had marked it hours ago. Around her, technicians moved with purpose between consoles, their voices a low murmur of systems checks and confirmations. The massive screens at the front of the room displayed trajectory calculations, fuel consumption rates, and Bobby's vital signs--transmitted from the medical bay where he waited in his pressure suit, probably wondering why she hadn't come to say goodbye.

She stood, the folder clutched against her chest, and made her way through the maze of workstations toward the glass-walled observation room where Director Kellerman stood with General Pritchard. Their silhouettes were backlit by the glow of the launch pad feeds, two men shaped by certainty she no longer felt.

Sarah knocked once and entered without waiting for permission.

Kellerman turned, his NASA administrator's smile already in place--the one he wore for press conferences and congressional committees. "Dr. Chen. Shouldn't you be at the communications console running final checks?"

"The timelines don't match." She set the folder on the conference table between them. "Every revision pushes the rescue mission further out. The original proposal said eighteen months. We're now at--"

"Projected estimates," General Pritchard interrupted. He was Air Force, not NASA, and his presence in Mission Control had always felt like an occupation. "The Soviets are unpredictable. We need flexibility in our planning."

"Flexibility?" Sarah opened the folder, her hands steadier than she felt. "Or are we just moving goalposts? Bobby keeps asking me when he comes home. I've been telling him eighteen months because that's what I was told to tell him."

Kellerman moved to the window, his reflection ghostly in the glass. Beyond, the Saturn V stood illuminated against the pre-dawn sky, a white monument to ambition or hubris--Sarah was no longer sure which.

"Dr. Chen," he said, his voice taking on the paternal tone she'd learned to distrust, "you're an excellent linguist and communications specialist. That's why you're here. But the broader strategic picture--"

"Don't." The word came out sharper than she intended. "Don't patronize me. I've spent every day for eight months with Bobby. Teaching him, talking to him. He trusts me."

"Which is why your role is so vital," Pritchard said. He picked up the folder and closed it with deliberate care. "The boy needs to believe in the mission. Morale is critical for operational success."

The boy. As if Bobby were just another piece of equipment, like the lunar module or the communications array.

Sarah felt something cold settle in her stomach. "You never intended to bring him back, did you?"

The silence that followed had weight. She could hear the ventilation system, the distant clatter of a dropped pen, someone laughing at a console two rooms away.

Kellerman finally turned to face her. His expression had shifted into something harder, more honest. "The Soviets are six months ahead of us. Maybe less. Every intelligence report confirms they're preparing their own manned lunar mission. If they get there first, if they establish permanent presence--" He shook his head. "We can't let that happen. The strategic implications--"

"Strategic implications," Sarah repeated. The words tasted like ash. "He's nine years old."

"He's a volunteer," Pritchard said.

"He's a \*child\*. He can't volunteer. He doesn't even have the vocabulary to understand what permanent means. I tried to teach him 'never' last month and your people told me to remove it from his lessons."

Kellerman's jaw tightened. "Dr. Chen, I need you to understand something. We are at war. Not a hot war, thank God, but a war nonetheless. And in war, we make sacrifices. Terrible sacrifices. The President himself has signed off on this mission. The Joint Chiefs. This is bigger than one boy, bigger than you or me or anyone in this building."

Sarah looked at the general, who met her gaze without flinching. His uniform was pristine, his ribbons a rainbow of conflicts she was too young to remember. He'd sent men to die before. This was just another calculation.

"What happens when he realizes?" she asked quietly. "When he figures out that the rescue mission isn't coming? When his food starts running low and he's alone up there with nothing but silence?"

"That's why you trained him so well," Kellerman said. "He'll have his mission. His purpose. He'll conduct experiments, send back data, establish American presence on lunar soil. He'll be a hero."

"He'll be terrified."

"He'll be remembered." Pritchard moved toward the door, his hand on the frame. "We all serve in our own way, Dr. Chen. Bobby's service happens to be up there. Yours is down here, making sure he can communicate, that he stays focused on his objectives. Can you do that?"

The question hung in the air like smoke. Through the window, the Saturn V's service structure had begun to retract, the final preparation before fueling. In a few hours, Bobby would be strapped into that capsule, riding a controlled explosion into the void.

And she would be the voice he trusted, guiding him there.

"I want it noted," Sarah said, her voice barely above a whisper, "that I object to this mission on ethical grounds."

"Noted," Kellerman said, though he made no move to write anything down. "Now, Dr. Chen, I need you at your station. We have a launch to execute."

Sarah picked up the folder, its pages full of lies and shifting timelines. Her reflection in the glass

looked like a stranger--hair pulled back in a severe bun, dark circles under her eyes, NASA credentials hanging from her neck like a noose.

"One more thing," she said at the door. "When it ends--however it ends--I want you both to remember that you knew. That we all knew."

She didn't wait for a response. The control room seemed brighter when she returned, the screens more vivid, every sound sharp-edged and clear. Her console waited, the communication protocols she'd designed displayed across three monitors. In a few hours, she'd use them to talk to Bobby as he hurtled toward the moon.

As she sat down, she caught sight of the medical bay feed. Bobby was visible in profile, his small frame almost swallowed by the pressure suit. He was practicing signs to himself, his gloved fingers moving through the sequences she'd taught him.

\*Ready. Strong. Home soon.\*

Sarah closed her eyes and took a breath that hurt.

Then she put on her headset and began the pre-launch communications check, her voice steady and professional, betraying nothing of the woman who was screaming inside.

\*\*Scene 4: A montage of flashbacks shows ...\*\*

\*\*Scene 4: A montage of flashbacks shows Bobby's training intensifying\*\*

The centrifuge spun Bobby at four Gs, and Sarah watched through the observation window as his lips pulled back from his teeth in an involuntary grimace. His small hands gripped the armrests--not frantically, but with the steady pressure she'd taught him. Through the reinforced glass, she could see the training officer counting down with his fingers. Five. Four. Three.

Bobby's eyes found hers through two panes of glass and twenty feet of space. He raised one trembling hand and signed: \*Fun.\*

Sarah's laugh caught in her throat like a stone.

"Vitals are good," the technician beside her reported, his voice flat with routine. "Heart rate elevated but within parameters. He's doing better than Mitchell did on his first run."

Mitchell had been thirty-two years old and had vomited for an hour afterward.

The centrifuge whined down. When they opened the capsule, Bobby emerged with his distinctive rolling gait, one hand steadying himself against the metal frame. His fur was matted with sweat, but he moved directly to Sarah and signed: \*Again?\*

"Tomorrow," she signed back, then added the gesture for rest.

Bobby's expression--that peculiar chimpanzee blend of human emotion and something utterly other--shifted to something she'd learned to read as disappointment. He signed: \*Bobby strong. Ready now.\*

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In the lunar module simulator, Bobby's fingers moved across the control panel with the precision of a concert pianist. Sarah stood behind the training supervisor, Commander Jack Reeves, a Korean War veteran with a face like weathered granite and eyes that gave away nothing.

"Pitch angle," Reeves said into the microphone.

Bobby's hand moved to the correct dial without hesitation.

"Throttle down thirty percent."

The adjustment came smooth and immediate.

"Fuel pressure warning."

Bobby's eyes scanned the panel. His fingers flew through a sequence: secondary valve, pressure check, compensate. The warning light died. He looked up at the observation window and signed:

\*Problem fixed.\*

Reeves leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "Run the abort scenario."

Sarah's hands tightened on the back of his chair. "Jack--"

"Abort scenario," he repeated, voice harder.

The simulator's lights went red. Alarms shrieked through the tiny space. Through the monitor, Sarah

watched Bobby's face--no panic, no freezing. His hands moved through the emergency sequence they'd drilled into him over eight hundred repetitions. Master alarm. Abort stage. Engine cutoff. Ascent preparation.

Forty-five seconds. Textbook perfect.

When they let him out, Bobby's hands were shaking. Not from fear--from adrenaline. He signed to Sarah: \*Bobby did good?\*

"You did perfectly," she signed back, then pulled him into a hug before she could stop herself. His arms wrapped around her waist, his head pressed against her chest where he could hear her heartbeat. She felt him relax, the tension draining from his compact frame.

Over his head, she met Reeves's gaze. The commander's expression remained neutral, but something flickered there. Concern? Pity? He looked away first.

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Late evening in the observation room. Most of the technicians had gone home. Sarah sat across from Bobby at the small table where they'd first met, a cup of coffee growing cold at her elbow. Bobby had a juice box--apple, his favorite--and was signing questions between sips.

\*Why Bobby go alone?\*

She'd prepared for this one. Had the answer ready. "You're the best," she signed. "The strongest. The smartest. You can do things other astronauts can't."

Bobby's head tilted, considering. Then: \*When Sarah come?\*

Her hands froze halfway to a response. Through the window behind Bobby, she could see the night janitor pushing his cart down the hallway, the squeak of wheels marking time she didn't have.

"Sarah stays here," she finally signed. "Sarah helps Bobby from Earth."

\*After? When Bobby comes home?\*

The fluorescent lights hummed. Somewhere in the building, a phone rang and rang and went unanswered.

"Yes," she signed, and hated herself for the lie she could feel in the word. "After."

Bobby brightened. He set down his juice box and signed rapidly: \*Bobby comes home. Bobby tells Sarah about moon. About stars. About everything Bobby sees.\*

"Yes," Sarah signed again, the repetition making it worse. "Tell me everything."

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The vacuum chamber test. Bobby in the prototype suit, smaller than any NASA had built before, custom-fitted to his frame. The chamber door sealed with a hiss that reminded Sarah of a coffin closing. Through the porthole, she watched Bobby give the thumbs up--a human gesture he'd adopted with enthusiasm.

The pressure dropped. The suit inflated. Bobby moved through his checklist: joint mobility, glove dexterity, helmet seal verification. Each movement was slower in the suit, more deliberate. He picked up the sample collection tool, manipulated the bag, demonstrated the procedure they'd practiced a thousand times.

Fifteen minutes. Thirty. Forty-five.

The suit technician, a woman named Patricia who'd sewn every seam herself, bit her thumbnail. "He should be getting tired."

But Bobby continued, methodical and patient. An hour. Ninety minutes. Finally, the test supervisor called it. When they repressurized and opened the chamber, Bobby emerged drenched in sweat but steady. He looked at Sarah and signed: \*How long?\*

"Ninety-three minutes," she signed back.

Bobby's face split in what she'd learned to recognize as his version of a grin. He signed: \*Longer than Armstrong training record.\*

Sarah glanced at Patricia, who nodded confirmation. "By eighteen minutes," the technician said quietly.

That night, Sarah found Bobby in his habitat, sitting by the window that looked out over the Houston facility. The lights of the city sprawled beyond the fence line, a galaxy of human ambition and human failure.

She sat beside him. He leaned against her shoulder, warm and solid and real.

\*Stars,\* he signed, pointing up at the few visible through the light pollution.

"Yes," she signed. "Soon you'll see them all. More stars than you can count."

\*Bobby scared,\* he signed, so small she almost missed it.

Her throat constricted. "Scared is okay," she signed back. "Brave means scared but doing it anyway."

Bobby's hand found hers, his fingers curling around her palm. They sat like that for a long time, watching the distant lights, neither one signing the questions that mattered most.

When she finally stood to leave, Bobby signed one more thing: \*Sarah proud of Bobby?\*

She knelt down to his level, made sure he could see her face clearly in the dim light. "Sarah is so proud of Bobby," she signed, each gesture deliberate and true. "Always proud. Forever proud."

Bobby's arms wrapped around her neck. She held him, memorizing the weight of him, the warmth, the particular smell of the special shampoo they used on his fur.

In her pocket, the mission timeline crackled--she'd received the updated version that afternoon. The rescue window had shifted again. Moved back. And back. And back.

She held Bobby tighter and did not let herself cry until she was alone in her car in the parking lot, Houston spreading out below her like a circuit board, all those lights connecting to nothing, signifying nothing, burning bright and cold in the Texas night.

\*\*Scene 5: The lunar module successfully ...\*\*

\*\*Scene 5: The lunar module successfully touches down in the Sea of Tranquility\*\*

The altimeter counted down in Sarah's peripheral vision, numbers bleeding together through the sheen of tears she refused to let fall. Thirty feet. Twenty. Ten.

"Contact light," the CAPCOM announced, his voice steady despite the tremor in his hand as he gripped the console edge.

The thud of landing transmitted through the audio feed--a sound that traveled 238,900 miles to punch Sarah in the chest. Around her, mission control exploded. Men leaped from their chairs, cigar smoke blooming toward the ceiling tiles like celebratory gunfire. Someone's coffee mug shattered on the linoleum, the crash lost beneath the roar of triumph.

"We have touchdown! Tranquility Base has landed!"

Kellerman was already shaking hands with the brass, his smile broad and practiced, sweat stains spreading beneath his arms despite the air conditioning that kept the room at a constant sixty-eight degrees. Camera flashes popped from the observation gallery where the press pool had been corralled. Sarah could see their mouths moving, shouting questions that couldn't penetrate the bulletproof glass.

General Pritchard appeared at her station, champagne bottle already uncorked in his meaty fist. "Dr. Chen. Historic day. Historic." He filled a paper cup without asking, foam spilling over the rim onto her carefully organized flight notes.

She stared at the spreading wet circle, at the ink beginning to blur on her handwriting. \*Positive reinforcement protocols. Post-landing stress indicators. Emergency sign vocabulary.\*

"Thank you, General." The words came from somewhere outside herself.

On the main screen, Bobby's helmet camera feed flickered to life. The lunar module's interior was cramped, every surface covered in switches, dials, and the Velcro patches they'd added to help him orient himself. Through the triangular window, the Sea of Tranquility stretched away in shades of gray--charcoal, ash, slate, pearl. Shadows cut sharp as razors where craters interrupted the ancient plain.

Bobby's gloved hands entered the frame, moving with deliberate precision through the post-landing checklist. Sarah had drilled these procedures into him for six months until they became muscle memory, until he could perform them in his sleep. Now she watched him execute each step perfectly, his movements economical, professional.

His right hand rose into view, fingers forming the sign: \*ENGINES OFF\*.

"Confirming engine shutdown," the CAPCOM translated unnecessarily. Everyone who mattered already knew.

\*FUEL STABLE\*.

\*SYSTEMS NOMINAL\*.

\*TEMPERATURE GOOD\*.

Each sign crisp, textbook-perfect. Sarah's teaching reflected back at her from a quarter million miles away. Around her, the celebration intensified. Someone had found a radio, and "The Star-Spangled Banner" crackled through speakers meant for telemetry data. The champagne made its rounds--Kellerman's cup raised high, Pritchard's thick fingers wrapped around the bottle's neck.

Sarah's own cup sat untouched, bubbles rising and dying, rising and dying.

Bobby's hands continued their methodical dance. \*OXYGEN GOOD\*. \*COMMUNICATIONS GOOD\*. \*READY FOR NEXT PHASE\*.

"Beautiful," Kellerman breathed, appearing at Sarah's shoulder. His breath reeked of champagne and the cigar he'd been saving for this moment. "Look at him. Perfect. You trained him perfect, Sarah."

She wanted to claw his eyes out. Instead, she nodded, her throat too tight for words.

The camera feed showed Bobby settling back in his seat, the mission timeline calling for a rest period before the first EVA. Protocol dictated he should sleep, conserve energy, let his body adjust to one-sixth gravity. But Bobby's hands rose again, and Sarah's heart clenched.

\*MISSION SUCCESS\*, he signed, the gesture broad enough to be visible through the bulky suit.

Cheers erupted fresh. Pritchard clapped Kellerman on the back hard enough to make the mission director stumble. Flash bulbs strobed behind the observation glass.

Bobby's hands moved again. \*GOOD LANDING\*.

"Damn right it was!" someone shouted.

\*BOBBY SAFE\*.

The celebration noise seemed to recede, pulled away like a wave before a tsunami. Sarah leaned forward, her fingers white-knuckled on the console edge. She knew that pause, that slight tilt of Bobby's helmet as he considered his next sign. She'd seen it a thousand times in the training facility when he was working through a complex thought, trying to find the right combination of gestures to express what he felt.

His hands rose slowly, almost hesitantly. Then, with the same precision he'd shown throughout the landing sequence, Bobby signed two words that cut through the champagne haze like a scalpel through flesh:

\*WHERE SARAH?\*

The question hung in the air, transmitted through vacuum and atmosphere, bouncing off satellites and relay stations, traveling through cables and circuits to materialize in the sudden silence of mission control. The camera feed showed Bobby's hands frozen in position, waiting for an answer

that would never come.

Someone's champagne cup hit the floor with a wet splat.

Kellerman's smile flickered, just for a moment, before reasserting itself with visible effort. "He's just disoriented. Perfectly normal post-landing confusion."

But Sarah saw Pritchard's expression harden, saw the general's eyes cut to her like a blade. She felt the weight of every person in mission control turning to look at her station, at the woman who had taught a chimpanzee to ask questions no one wanted to answer.

On the screen, Bobby's hands remained raised, still forming the sign. \*WHERE SARAH?\* The question repeated, more insistent now, his whole body leaning forward in the cramped module as if he could somehow see through the camera, through the miles and the void, to find her face among the celebrating strangers.

Sarah's hand moved to her microphone switch before she could stop herself. Kellerman's hand clamped down on her wrist, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise.

"Dr. Chen," he said quietly, his mouth still fixed in that terrible smile for the cameras above. "You're wanted in the director's office. Now."

The champagne had stopped flowing. The music played on, tinny and discordant, a soundtrack to the frozen tableau of mission control's triumph. Through it all, Bobby's hands stayed raised on the screen, asking and asking and asking into the silence, until finally--slowly, with what Sarah recognized as confusion, then hurt--they lowered out of frame.

The last thing she saw before Pritchard's security detail escorted her from the room was Bobby's helmet tilting down, the camera angle showing nothing but the gray dust of the Sea of Tranquility through the window, and the long shadow of the lunar module stretching across the loneliest landscape in human experience.

Behind her, someone started the applause again, forced and hollow, and the celebration stumbled back to life like a corpse jerked upright by strings.

\*\*Scene 6: As the celebration continues a...\*\*

\*\*Scene 6: As the celebration continues around her...\*\*

The champagne cork ricocheted off the acoustic tiles overhead. Someone grabbed Sarah's shoulders from behind--Henderson from Telemetry--shaking her in celebration she couldn't feel. The control room had erupted into controlled chaos, men in white shirts and thin ties embracing, lighting cigarettes with trembling hands, voices overlapping in a cacophony of relief and triumph.

"We did it! Christ almighty, we actually did it!"

Sarah kept her eyes on Monitor 4. The grainy black-and-white feed showed Bobby in the cramped lunar module, his helmet still on, gloved hands moving through the post-landing checklist. She'd watched him practice these exact movements five hundred times in the simulator. The muscle memory was perfect.

Kellerman was at the podium now, his voice booming over the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen, at

20:17 UTC, the United States of America has successfully landed a manned vessel on the surface of the moon. All systems nominal. Pilot status--" he paused, glancing at Sarah, "--confirmed stable."

The room roared. Someone thrust a plastic cup of champagne into Sarah's hand. She took it, didn't drink.

On the monitor, Bobby had moved to the communications station. His hands came up, clearly visible now against the dark interior of the module. Sarah's breath caught. This was it--the final status report. The one she'd drilled into him until he could sign it in his sleep.

\*Mission complete,\* Bobby signed, his movements crisp despite the bulky gloves.

"Translation?" Kellerman called out, though he knew. They all knew.

"Mission complete," Sarah said, her voice steady.

\*Systems good.\*

"Systems good."

\*Bobby safe.\*

"Bobby safe."

The room was settling now, men returning to their stations, still grinning, still riding the high of the impossible made real. Sarah felt Henderson's hand slip from her shoulder. The champagne bubbles

fizzed against the rim of her cup, tiny pops she could barely hear over the blood rushing in her ears.

Bobby's hands dropped. For a moment he was still, just a grainy figure in a bulky suit, sitting in a tin can a quarter million miles from home. Then he raised his hands again.

Sarah's cup hit the floor.

The movements were slow, deliberate. Not from the checklist. Bobby tilted his head, and even through the pixelated feed, even through the helmet's visor, Sarah could see him looking directly at the camera. Directly at her.

\*Where Sarah?\*

The question hung in the vacuum between worlds.

Sarah heard herself make a sound--small, broken. Her hand moved without thought, rising to sign back, though he couldn't see her, though Monitor 4 was receive-only, though the distance was too vast for anything but radio waves and lies.

"Dr. Chen?" Kellerman's voice had lost its triumph. "Translation?"

She couldn't speak. Her hand was still raised, frozen mid-sign.

On the monitor, Bobby waited. His hands remained in position, holding the question. In the module's harsh lighting, she could see the small stuffed dog she'd given him tucked into the webbing beside his seat. The one he'd named Laika.

The control room had gone quiet. Heads were turning. Someone coughed. The champagne smell was suddenly sickening, sweet and wrong.

"Dr. Chen." Kellerman again, harder now. "What did he say?"

Bobby signed it again, slower this time. \*Where Sarah?\*

Then his hands moved through a sequence she'd taught him in secret, during their last training session, when the guards had stepped out for coffee and she'd known--\*known\*--it was the last time.

\*Sarah come soon?\*

"Jesus," someone whispered.

Sarah's legs gave out. She caught herself on the edge of a console, metal biting into her palms. On the monitor, Bobby was still waiting, still looking at the camera with those dark eyes that trusted her, that had always trusted her, even when she'd taught him to climb into a rocket pointed at the sky.

\*When Sarah come?\*

Her voice came out as a whisper. "He's asking where I am."

"Tell him--" Kellerman started.

"Tell him what?" Sarah turned on him, and the room flinched at the raw edge in her voice. "Tell him what, exactly?"

Kellerman's jaw worked. Around them, the control room held its breath. On the wall, the mission clock ticked forward. On the monitor, Bobby's hands finally dropped. He looked down at the stuffed dog, then back at the camera.

One more sign. Simple. One she'd taught him the very first day.

\*Alone.\*

Then Bobby turned away from the camera, his shoulders small inside the suit, and began the sequence for powering down non-essential systems. Following the checklist. Being good. Being the perfect pilot they'd trained him to be.

Sarah watched him disappear into the routine, each movement precise and empty, and felt something fundamental crack inside her chest. The control room stayed silent. The champagne went flat in forgotten cups.

On the moon, in the Sea of Tranquility, Bobby worked alone.

And Sarah Chen, who had taught him the words for "safe" and "good" and "home" but never "permanent" or "never" or "I'm sorry," stood in mission control with nothing left to sign but the truth he would never see.

The celebration was over.

## **Chapter 2: Transmissions from the Sea of Tranquility**

\*\*Scene 1: Sarah sits in the darkened tra...\*\*

\*\*Scene 1: Sarah sits in the darkened translation room\*\*

The translation room smelled of burnt coffee and electronic ozone. Sarah sat three feet from the monitor, close enough to see the grain of the video feed, the slight compression artifacts that betrayed the signal's quarter-million-mile journey. The room's fluorescent lights had been dimmed at her request--she'd found that the darkness helped her focus on Bobby's hands, on the subtle nuances of movement that carried meaning.

On the screen, Bobby floated in the habitat's main compartment, his dark fur haloed by the white walls of the lunar module. Zero gravity suited him better than it suited most astronauts. He moved with an ease that the human crews never quite achieved, repositioning himself with small touches against handholds designed for his grip.

"Transmission 1-7 beginning," Jerry Kowalski announced from the communications console behind her. His voice carried the forced brightness of someone trying to maintain enthusiasm for a task growing routine. "Vitals look good. He's been active for about two hours."

Sarah didn't respond. She was already watching Bobby's hands.

The chimpanzee oriented himself toward the camera, his dark eyes finding the lens with an awareness that still startled her. He'd always known when he was being watched. Even in the lab,

years ago, he'd perform differently when he knew she was behind the observation glass.

Bobby's right hand rose to his chest, then extended outward. \*Bobby.\* The name-sign she'd given him when he was three years old, adapted from ASL but uniquely his.

His hands moved through the practiced sequence of the daily report. \*Habitat.\* His fingers measured the air. \*Temperature good.\* A pause as he glanced at the food dispenser mounted to the wall. \*Food enough.\* Another pause. \*Water good.\*

"Standard report," Tom Garrett said from the doorway. The Mission Director had a habit of appearing silently, watching over shoulders. "Nothing unusual?"

Sarah held up a hand for silence. Something in Bobby's posture had changed. He'd stopped mid-sign, his attention drawn to the small window set into the habitat's wall. The porthole was barely eighteen inches across, but it framed a view no chimpanzee had ever seen: the lunar surface stretching to a too-close horizon, and above it, the black of space.

Bobby's hands moved again, but slower now. Hesitant.

\*Window,\* he signed. Then his hands made a shape Sarah had taught him for things that didn't work correctly, that failed to meet expectations. \*Wrong.\*

"What's he saying?" Jerry asked.

Sarah leaned forward. "He says the window is wrong."

"Wrong how? Is there a seal problem? Jerry, get Engineering--"

"Wait." Sarah's voice cut through the sudden tension. "He's not done."

Bobby's hands were moving in a way she'd never seen before. He signed \*sky\*--the upward sweep of both hands she'd taught him using planetarium visits and picture books. But then his hands came together sharply, the sign for \*broken\* that he'd learned when a puzzle toy had shattered.

\*Sky broken.\*

The words hung in the air of the translation room like an accusation.

"Sky broken?" Tom's voice carried skepticism. "That doesn't make sense. There's no sky on the moon. Just space."

"He doesn't have a sign for space," Sarah said quietly. "Sky is the closest concept he has."

Bobby was still floating there, still looking at the camera. His hands moved again, repeating the sequence. \*Window wrong. Sky broken.\* Then he added a third sign, one that made Sarah's chest tighten: \*Why?\*

Jerry laughed, a nervous sound. "He's probably just confused by the view. It's not like anything he saw in training."

But Sarah had spent seven years learning to read the subtle expressions that crossed Bobby's face, the tilt of his head that indicated genuine confusion versus playful mischief versus something

deeper. What she saw now was none of those things.

What she saw was distress.

"He's trying to tell us something," she said. "Something he doesn't have the vocabulary for."

"Chen, he's reporting on systems like he's supposed to." Tom moved closer to the screen. "The window comment is probably just... I don't know, stimulus response. He sees something unexpected, he comments on it. Doesn't mean there's a problem."

On screen, Bobby had turned back to the window. His hand reached out, fingers splaying against the thick glass. For a long moment, he simply floated there, staring out at the alien landscape.

Then his hands moved again, signing to himself in the way he sometimes did when he thought no one was watching. Sarah had seen him do it in his enclosure late at night, practicing signs or perhaps--she'd always wondered--thinking in the only language he fully possessed.

\*Dark,\* he signed. \*Always dark.\*

"Transmission concluding," Jerry said. "He's moving back to the rest module."

The screen flickered as Bobby propelled himself out of frame. For a moment, the camera showed only the empty habitat, the white walls and the small window with its frame of absolute black.

Then the feed cut to the holding screen--the NASA logo rotating slowly against a star field that was, Sarah thought, far more romantic than the real thing Bobby could see from his window.

Tom was already pulling out his phone. "I'll have Engineering check the window seals. Probably nothing, but better safe than sorry."

"It's not the seals," Sarah said.

"Then what is it?"

She looked at the empty screen, seeing in her mind Bobby's hands forming those shapes. \*Window wrong. Sky broken. Why?\*

"I think," she said slowly, "he's trying to tell us that something about what he's seeing doesn't match what he expected. What we taught him to expect."

"We prepared him for the lunar environment. Showed him footage, ran simulations--"

"We showed him pictures, Tom. Images on screens. We couldn't prepare him for what it actually \*feels\* like to look out a window and see that." She gestured at the blank monitor. "To see a sky that never changes. Stars that don't twinkle. A horizon that's all wrong because the moon is so much smaller than Earth."

Jerry had pulled up the transmission log, scrolling through previous reports. "He hasn't mentioned the window before. All his other transmissions have been strictly procedural."

"Maybe it took him this long to process what he was seeing," Sarah said. "To find a way to articulate it."

Tom was quiet for a moment, his jaw working. Finally: "Keep monitoring. If he shows signs of distress affecting his ability to perform his duties, we'll need to know."

"And if he's distressed but still performing?"

The Mission Director met her eyes. "Then he does his job. Same as every astronaut who's ever looked out a window and felt homesick."

He left, his footsteps echoing in the corridor outside.

Jerry began shutting down the communications array, the banks of equipment powering down with soft electronic sighs. "You really think he understands what he's seeing? I mean, understands it enough to have an opinion about it?"

Sarah thought about Bobby at three years old, learning his first signs. Bobby at five, combining signs in new ways to describe things she hadn't taught him words for. \*Water bird\* for swan. \*Hurt fruit\* for rotten apple. \*Metal sky\* for ceiling.

He'd always been trying to bridge the gap between his experience and his limited vocabulary.

"I think," she said, "that we sent someone to the moon who's smart enough to know something's wrong, but doesn't have the language to tell us what."

She saved the transmission file, flagging it for detailed review. On her secondary monitor, the mission timeline scrolled past--weeks of transmissions still to come, months of isolation Bobby

would endure.

Outside, through the translation room's small window, she could see the Houston sky: blue and bright and filled with the comfortable chaos of clouds. A sky that made sense. A sky that wasn't broken.

She wondered what Bobby was looking at now, in his small habitat a quarter million miles away. Wondered what signs he was making to himself in the darkness, trying to name the unnameable thing he'd discovered.

The loneliness of being the only one who could see that something was wrong.

**\*\*Scene 2: A week into the mission, Sarah...\*\***

The press conference room smelled of coffee and ambition--bitter and overheated. Sarah sat at the long table beneath the harsh fluorescent lights, her hands folded in her lap to keep them from trembling. To her left, Tom Garrett adjusted his microphone with the ease of a man who'd never questioned whether his words mattered. To her right, General Whitfield sat ramrod straight in his dress uniform, chest heavy with ribbons that caught the camera flashes like small explosions.

Behind them, projected on a screen the size of a billboard, Bobby's face filled the room.

The photograph had been taken during a training session--Bobby in his modified pressure suit, one hand raised in what the caption called a "wave to America." Sarah knew it was actually the sign for "finished." He'd been asking if the day's work was done.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the NASA PR director was saying, a woman named Patricia Holbrook whose smile seemed shellacked in place, "we're proud to present the latest update on Operation Tranquility Base. As you can see, our pioneering astronaut is thriving in his lunar habitat."

Thriving. The word landed in Sarah's stomach like a stone.

That morning, alone in the observation room at 4 AM because she couldn't sleep, she'd watched Bobby's private transmission. The one that wouldn't be shown here. He'd sat in the center of his habitat, the Earth visible through the porthole behind him--a blue marble in the black--and signed with slow, deliberate movements: "Troop gone. Bobby call. Nobody answer."

He'd repeated it three times, his dark eyes fixed on the camera as if he could will her to appear on the other side. Then he'd moved to the porthole and pressed both palms against it, a gesture she'd seen him make a thousand times in the enclosure when he wanted to be let out.

"Dr. Chen?" Patricia's voice cut through her memory. "Perhaps you could share some of Bobby's recent communications with our friends in the press?"

Sarah felt every camera in the room swing toward her like weapons. She cleared her throat and reached for the water glass, buying seconds.

"Of course." Her voice came out steadier than she felt. "Bobby has been very communicative. He's reported on all his daily activities--his meals, his exercise routines, his system checks."

"And his mood?" This from a reporter in the front row, a young man with a tape recorder thrust forward like an offering. "Is he happy up there?"

Happy. She thought of Bobby's signs that morning, the way his shoulders had hunched inward, making himself smaller. The way he'd touched his chest with both hands--the sign for "alone"--then spread his arms wide to encompass the entire habitat. Alone everywhere.

"Bobby is adapting remarkably well," she said, and hated herself for it. "He's following all protocols and maintaining the habitat systems with precision."

Tom leaned toward his microphone. "What Dr. Chen is too modest to mention is that Bobby's cognitive performance has actually exceeded our projections. He's not just following procedures--he's problem-solving in real-time. Yesterday, he identified and corrected a minor pressure irregularity before Mission Control even detected it."

The reporters scribbled eagerly. Sarah watched them transform Bobby's desperate competence--his frantic need to do everything right, to be good enough to bring home--into a triumph of American ingenuity.

"General Whitfield," called a woman from the back, "there are reports that the Soviets are planning their own primate mission. How does Bobby's success factor into the broader space race?"

Whitfield's jaw tightened with satisfaction. "What we're demonstrating here is the superiority of American innovation and training. While our competitors are still running ground tests, we have a fully operational lunar base with a crew member who represents the cutting edge of behavioral science." He nodded toward Sarah. "Dr. Chen's work has been instrumental in this achievement."

Instrumental. Sarah's nails dug into her palms.

Patricia advanced to the next slide--a video clip from three days ago that had been carefully selected, carefully edited. Bobby floated in the reduced gravity, performing a somersault that looked playful. What the clip didn't show was what came after: Bobby signing "Wrong. Wrong. Wrong." while touching his feet to the floor, trying to make his body feel heavy again.

"As you can see," Patricia narrated over the footage, "our astronaut is even finding ways to enjoy his historic mission."

Laughter rippled through the room. Warm, indulgent laughter.

Sarah watched Bobby's image tumble across the screen and felt something crack inside her chest. She thought of the years she'd spent teaching him, the careful vocabulary they'd built together. Words for food and comfort, for curiosity and play. She'd taught him "home" and "friend" and "safe."

She'd never taught him "betrayal," but she wondered if he was learning it now.

"Dr. Chen." A new voice, from a reporter she didn't recognize. "Can you tell us what Bobby's most recent message was? His actual words, in sign language?"

The room fell silent. Sarah felt Tom's warning glance, felt Patricia's smile tighten almost imperceptibly.

She could tell them. She could sign it right here, right now, let the cameras capture Bobby's truth: "Troop gone. Bobby call. Nobody answer." She could make them see what she saw every morning in those private transmissions--the way Bobby searched the habitat as if his family might be hiding

somewhere, the way he signed to the empty air.

Her hands remained folded in her lap.

"This morning," she said slowly, "Bobby signed that his systems check was complete and that he was beginning his exercise routine." All true. He had signed those things. Eventually. After the parts she was omitting. "He's very diligent about maintaining the schedule."

"Sounds like a model astronaut," the reporter said, and the room chuckled again.

Patricia beamed. "Indeed. Now, if we could move on to questions about the habitat's technical specifications..."

The conference continued for another forty minutes. Sarah answered when called upon, her responses carefully calibrated to reveal nothing that mattered. She watched herself on the monitors positioned around the room--a small Asian woman in a NASA blazer, looking professional and composed. A translator faithfully rendering the signs of a chimpanzee a quarter-million miles away.

A liar.

When it finally ended, Tom caught her elbow as she tried to escape. "That went well," he said. "You handled the questions perfectly."

"Did I?" She couldn't keep the edge from her voice.

His expression flickered--something that might have been concern, or might have been annoyance

at her tone. "Sarah, I know this is difficult. But what we're doing here matters. The data we're gathering, the boundaries we're pushing--"

"He asked for his troop this morning." The words came out flat. "He called for them. He waited for an answer."

Tom glanced around, but the reporters had already moved on, clustering around Whitfield for additional quotes. He lowered his voice. "He's adjusting. It takes time."

"He's alone, Tom. He doesn't understand why."

"He understands the mission. You trained him yourself."

"I trained him to follow commands. That's not the same as understanding." She pulled her arm free.  
"And it's definitely not the same as consent."

Tom's face hardened. "We've been over this. The psychological evaluations--"

"Were designed to confirm what you already decided." Sarah felt seven days of sleepless nights rising in her throat. "You wanted a mission. You got one. Congratulations."

She walked away before he could respond, her heels clicking against the linoleum like a countdown. Behind her, she heard Patricia's laugh, bright and hollow, as she entertained a cluster of reporters.

In the bathroom, Sarah locked herself in a stall and leaned against the cool metal door. Her hands were shaking now, finally allowed to shake. She raised them in front of her face and signed to the

empty air, practicing words she would never send:

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

But Bobby was a quarter-million miles away, and sorry wasn't a sign she'd ever taught him. Maybe because she'd never imagined she'd need it.

Maybe because she'd known, even then, that some betrayals were too large for any language to contain.

**\*\*Scene 3: During a late-night transmissi...\*\***

**\*\*Scene 3: During a late-night transmission review\*\***

The building hummed with its after-hours emptiness, the fluorescent lights in the corridors dimmed to conservation mode. Sarah's office glowed like a fishbowl in the darkness, the only occupied space on the entire floor. She'd sent her assistant home three hours ago. The cleaning crew had come and gone, leaving behind the chemical scent of disinfectant that couldn't quite mask the stale coffee in her mug.

2:47 AM, according to the clock on her desk. She'd stopped counting the nights like this.

On the monitor, Bobby's transmission from earlier that day played for the seventh time. The timestamp in the corner read 14:22 GMT--his afternoon session, though afternoon and morning had no meaning in the lunar habitat's controlled environment. No meaning anywhere on the Moon, where the sun crawled across the sky in its month-long arc.

Sarah's hand hovered over the pause button, then drew back. She needed to see it again.

Bobby sat in the center of the habitat's main chamber, the curved white walls behind him marked with scuff marks from his movements. The camera angle was fixed, mounted high--too high for him to reach, even when he'd tried that first week, his dark form a blur of frustrated motion in the archived footage.

Now he'd stopped trying.

His signing had changed. That's what had kept her here, watching, rewinding, watching again. The technical team had flagged the transmission as "standard welfare check" and moved on. But they didn't know his language like she did. They didn't see what she saw.

Bobby's hands moved through the familiar shapes: \*Bobby\* (tap chest), \*report\* (hands moving outward), \*habitat\* (arms forming a circle). Standard opening. But then--

Sarah leaned forward, her face inches from the screen.

\*Earth\* (pointing up, though on the Moon "up" held a different meaning), then \*home\* (hands forming a roof), then \*gone\* (hands sweeping away), and finally \*place\* (palm down, indicating location). But he didn't pause between the signs as she'd taught him. Instead, they flowed together, each bleeding into the next, his hands barely completing one shape before beginning another.

"Earth-home-gone-place," Sarah whispered.

She'd never taught him that. Never even conceived of teaching him that.

Her fingers trembled as she typed notes into her tablet: \*Compound construction. Self-generated. Expressing concept of lost/unreachable origin point?\*

On screen, Bobby continued. His dark eyes stared directly at the camera with an intensity that made Sarah's breath catch. He knew she was watching. Somewhere, somehow, across that quarter-million miles of void, he knew.

\*Bobby\* (chest tap), then \*cage\* (hands gripping invisible bars)--she'd taught him that one during habitat training, trying to desensitize him to enclosed spaces--then \*no\* (hand slashing), and \*walls\* (hands pressing outward against nothing).

"Bobby-cage-no-walls."

Sarah's hand went to her mouth. The tablet slipped from her lap, clattering against the floor. She didn't pick it up.

A cage with no walls. A prison without bars. How did you describe being trapped in freedom, confined by infinite space? The habitat gave him more room than he'd ever had in the lab, more than the outdoor enclosure at the facility. But he was still caged--caged by vacuum, by distance, by the fundamental hostility of the lunar environment.

And he'd found the words for it. Created them.

She rewound again. Watched his hands move through the sequence. There was deliberation in his

movements, a careful precision that suggested he'd practiced this. How long had he spent in that white chamber, trying different combinations, different ways to make her understand?

The transmission continued. Bobby moved closer to the camera, his face filling the frame. His expression--God, his expression. Sarah had spent six years studying chimpanzee facial expressions, had published two papers on emotional communication in great apes. She knew every subtle variation of their features.

This was grief.

\*Sarah\* (the sign he'd created for her: hand brushing temple, mimicking how she pushed her hair back when concentrating), \*see\* (fingers pointing from his eyes to the camera), \*Bobby\* (chest tap), then a sequence that made her stomach drop: \*sky\* (hand sweeping overhead), \*always\* (circular motion), \*dark\* (hands closing over eyes).

He paused. His hands lowered. Then rose again.

\*Bobby\* (chest tap), \*always\* (circular motion), \*alone\* (single finger raised, isolated).

Another pause. Longer this time. His chest rose and fell with breath she couldn't hear through the silent transmission. The habitat's audio system had malfunctioned on day three. They'd decided it was non-essential for the mission parameters.

Bobby's hands moved again, slower now, and Sarah felt her eyes burning.

\*Same\* (fingers together), \*thing\* (object sign), then a question marker--palm up, head tilted.

"Sky always dark. Bobby always alone. Same thing?"

Sarah's chair rolled backward as she stood abruptly, her legs hitting the desk. Coffee sloshed over the rim of her forgotten mug, spreading across a stack of transmission logs. She didn't notice.

He was asking if his isolation and the lunar darkness were equivalent. If the perpetual night of the Moon and his perpetual solitude were the same phenomenon. If being alone was a type of darkness.

Or if darkness was a type of alone.

"Jesus Christ," she breathed. "Jesus Christ, Bobby."

Philosophy. He was developing philosophical frameworks. Metaphorical thinking beyond anything she'd documented, anything she'd thought possible. The cognitive leap required to connect emotional states with environmental conditions, to recognize the parallel, to question it--

Her hand found the edge of the desk, gripping hard enough that her knuckles went white.

She'd done this to him. Created a mind sophisticated enough to understand its own suffering, then stranded that mind in hell.

The transmission ended. Bobby's face froze on screen, those dark eyes staring out at her, waiting for an answer to his question that she didn't know how to give.

The monitor defaulted to the queue screen: seventeen more transmissions waiting for review, each one time-stamped, each one containing more of Bobby's evolving language, more of his desperate attempts to communicate what it meant to be the only living thing on an entire world.

Sarah sank back into her chair. The coffee stain spread across her desk, seeping into paper, but she couldn't look away from Bobby's frozen face.

Her phone buzzed. A text from Director Khalid: \*Media briefing 0800. Need your talking points on chimp's latest transmissions. Public loves the "space monkey" content. Ratings through the roof.\*

Space monkey. Content. Ratings.

Sarah's fingers moved across her keyboard, pulling up the response template Mission Control had approved. Cheerful signs. Simple concepts. \*Bobby good. Bobby strong. Sarah proud. Earth watches. Bobby important.\*

Lies a child could see through.

She looked back at the frozen image. At those eyes that had learned to recognize the difference between darkness and solitude, and wondered if they were the same.

Her hand hovered over the send button.

In the corner of her screen, a new notification appeared: incoming transmission from Tranquility Base. Bobby's morning report, right on schedule.

Sarah clicked play.

\*\*Scene 4: Mission Control convenes a mee...\*\*

\*\*Scene 4: Mission Control convenes a meeting\*\*

The conference room smelled of burnt coffee and desperation. Sarah sat at the long table, her fingers drumming against the laminate surface, watching condensation bead on the outside of her water glass. Through the interior windows, she could see the main control floor--a hive of activity that had become her second home over the past three weeks.

Tom Garrett entered first, his tie loosened, dark circles under his eyes. He wouldn't meet her gaze. That told her everything she needed to know about whose side he'd be on.

General Whitfield arrived next, his uniform crisp despite the late hour, followed by Dr. Raymond Pierce, NASA's consulting psychologist--a man Sarah had met exactly once before, during her initial hiring interview. He carried a leather portfolio and wore the kind of sympathetic expression that made her teeth ache.

Helen Voss from Public Relations was last, her heels clicking efficiently against the linoleum. She set down a stack of glossy folders, each embossed with the NASA logo.

"Dr. Chen, thank you for joining us," Whitfield said, as if she'd had a choice. He remained standing, hands clasped behind his back. "We need to discuss the content of recent transmissions."

Sarah's jaw tightened. "Bobby's transmissions, you mean."

"The subject's transmissions," Whitfield corrected. "There's been some concern about the... trajectory of the communications."

"Trajectory." Sarah let the word hang in the air. "He's lonely. Disoriented. That's not a trajectory, General. That's suffering."

Helen Voss opened one of her folders, sliding it across the table. Sarah glimpsed pie charts, demographic breakdowns, approval ratings. "The public narrative is critical right now," Voss said, her voice smooth as silk over steel. "Project Starward represents the largest single investment in the space program since Apollo. We've got congressional hearings in six weeks, and the footage of Bobby in his habitat has captured the nation's imagination. Children are writing letters. Schools are following his progress."

"They're following a lie," Sarah said flatly.

Pierce leaned forward, his expression carefully neutral. "Dr. Chen, no one is suggesting we're being dishonest. But we do need to consider the psychological impact--not just on Bobby, but on the viewing public. These transmissions are being broadcast worldwide."

"Not all of them," Tom interjected quietly. "We've been... curating what gets released to the press."

Sarah's head snapped toward him. "Curating?"

Whitfield cleared his throat. "The more concerning signs--the repetitive questions about return, the philosophical content--we've deemed those internal communications. For operational purposes

only."

The room felt suddenly smaller, airless. Sarah's hands flattened against the table. "You're censoring him."

"We're managing the narrative," Voss corrected. "There's a difference. The American people need to see this mission as the triumph it is. A chimpanzee successfully living and working on the lunar surface, paving the way for human colonization. That's the story."

"That's *\*a\** story," Sarah shot back. "It's not *\*the\** story. The story is that we sent a sentient being a quarter million miles away with no plan to bring him back, and now he's asking questions we don't want to answer."

Pierce opened his portfolio, removing several typed pages. "We've prepared some suggested responses. Phrases that might provide comfort while maintaining mission integrity." He slid the papers toward her. "Simple reassurances. 'Good work, Bobby.' 'Mission important.' 'You safe.'"

Sarah stared at the pages without touching them. The signs were rendered in English approximations, stripped of all the nuance that made Bobby's language *\*language\**. They looked like commands you'd give a dog.

"He'll know," she said quietly.

"Know what?" Whitfield asked.

"That I'm lying." Sarah looked up, meeting each pair of eyes in turn. "Bobby isn't stupid. He

understands context, subtext, emotional content. If I send him generic praise when he's asking existential questions about isolation and permanence, he'll recognize the evasion immediately. It will make everything worse."

"Worse than him signing about darkness and loneliness on national television?" Voss's patience was wearing thin. "Dr. Chen, I don't think you appreciate the delicacy of our position. We have three other missions in development, all dependent on continued funding. If the public perceives this as cruel--"

"It *\*is\** cruel!" Sarah's palm hit the table, the sharp crack silencing the room. She stood, her chair scraping backward. "We took a chimpanzee who understands community, who needs social bonds to survive, and we put him in solitary confinement on the moon. He's asking me why the sky is always dark because he's trying to understand if his isolation is as permanent as the lunar night. That's not a PR problem, that's a moral catastrophe."

Whitfield's expression hardened. "That's enough, Doctor."

"No, it's not nearly enough." Sarah's voice shook, but she didn't sit. "You want me to send him lies. Comfortable lies. But Bobby will see through them, and then he'll know that even I've abandoned him. The one person who might tell him the truth."

"And what truth would that be?" Pierce asked, his clinical tone infuriating. "That we can't bring him home? That this is permanent? How does that serve his psychological wellbeing?"

"How does lying serve it?" Sarah shot back. "You're a psychologist. You know what happens when trust breaks down. Right now, Bobby still believes in communication, in connection. If I betray that--"

"You're anthropomorphizing," Whitfield interrupted. "Projecting human emotional complexity onto an animal."

The words hit like a slap. Sarah felt heat rising up her neck, her hands curling into fists. "I've worked with Bobby for four years. I know his mind better than I know my own family's. And I'm telling you, if we reduce him to a prop in your propaganda campaign, if we treat his suffering as a PR inconvenience, we're not just failing him. We're failing ourselves."

Voss closed her folder with deliberate precision. "Dr. Chen, let me be clear. Your role is to facilitate communication, not to make policy decisions. We need you to send these responses." She tapped the prepared scripts. "Or we'll find someone who will."

The threat hung in the air like smoke.

Tom finally spoke, his voice heavy. "Sarah. They're not asking."

She looked at him--really looked at him--and saw the defeat in his eyes. He'd already lost this fight, probably before the meeting even started.

Sarah turned back to the scripts, forcing herself to read them. \*\*"Bobby good chimpanzee. Work important. Earth proud."\* The signs were grammatically correct but emotionally empty. Platitudes. The kind of thing you'd say to a child you weren't really listening to.

"How long?" she asked quietly.

"Excuse me?" Whitfield said.

"How long do you expect me to keep this up? Weeks? Months?" She looked up. "How long until Bobby stops signing altogether because he realizes no one's actually responding?"

Pierce made a note in his portfolio. "We'll monitor for signs of psychological deterioration and adjust accordingly."

"He's already deteriorating," Sarah said, her voice hollow now. "You're just not broadcasting that part."

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead. Through the window, Sarah could see technicians moving between consoles, tracking Bobby's life support, his oxygen levels, his heart rate. All the biological functions that confirmed he was alive, if not living.

"I need your answer, Dr. Chen," Whitfield said. "Will you send the approved responses?"

Sarah's fingers touched the edge of the scripts. The paper felt thin, insubstantial. She thought of Bobby in his habitat module, staring out at the Sea of Tranquility, signing questions into the void. She thought of his hands forming the signs for \*alone\* and \*dark\* and \*same\*, trying to build meaning from isolation.

"And if I refuse?" she asked.

Voss's smile didn't reach her eyes. "Then we'll have to consider whether you're fit to continue in your current position. I'm sure we can find a sign language interpreter who understands the bigger

picture."

The threat was clear. Comply or be replaced. And her replacement would send whatever lies they were told to send, would reduce Bobby's complex communications to simple commands and empty reassurances.

At least if she stayed, she could bear witness. She could remember what Bobby was really saying, even if no one else wanted to hear it.

Sarah pulled the scripts toward her, hating the weight

\*\*Scene 5: Three weeks into the mission, ...\*\*

\*\*Scene 5: Three weeks into the mission, Sarah watches Bobby's most haunting transmission yet\*\*

The translation room had taken on the quality of a vigil. Sarah sat in the blue-gray wash of monitor light at 2:47 AM, her fourth cup of coffee gone cold beside a stack of untouched translation logs. The room's air conditioning hummed its monotonous lullaby, but she'd long since stopped hearing it. Outside the sealed door, the skeleton crew of night shift controllers murmured over their consoles, tracking a lone chimpanzee 238,900 miles away.

The scheduled transmission had begun seventeen minutes ago.

Bobby sat motionless before the camera.

Sarah leaned forward, her reflection ghosting across the screen--hollow-eyed, translucent,

superimposed over the small figure in the bulky modified spacesuit. The habitat's LED panels cast harsh white light across Bobby's face, throwing deep shadows beneath his eyes. Those eyes stared directly into the camera with an intensity that made Sarah's chest constrict.

He wasn't sleeping. Wasn't grooming. Wasn't performing any of the scheduled tasks outlined in today's mission protocol. He simply sat, hands resting on his knees, breathing visible in the slight rise and fall of his suit's chest panel.

"Come on, Bobby," she whispered. "Tell me what you're thinking."

The time stamp in the corner ticked forward. Eighteen minutes. Nineteen.

She'd watched every transmission since launch--the initial excitement as Bobby explored the habitat, the methodical completion of lever-pressing tasks, the gradual slowing of his movements. But this stillness was different. This was contemplation.

The door hissed open behind her. She didn't turn.

"Sarah." Tom Garrett's voice, carefully neutral. "You should go home. Get some sleep."

"He's trying to tell me something."

"He's been sitting there for twenty minutes. Maybe the suit's malfunctioning. Maybe he's--"

"He's thinking." The words came out sharper than she intended. "Look at his eyes."

Tom moved closer, his cologne cutting through the room's stale air. On screen, Bobby's gaze hadn't wavered. Sarah had seen that expression before--in the lab, when she'd first introduced him to mirrors, when he'd stared at his own reflection with dawning recognition.

"Mission Control wants to know if we should send the reward stimulus. He missed his scheduled task window."

"No." Sarah's hand moved to the keyboard, hovering. "Wait."

Twenty-three minutes. Twenty-four.

Then Bobby moved.

His right hand lifted slowly, almost dreamlike, to chest height. Sarah's breath caught. She knew this sign--\*sky\*--the upward sweep of palm and fingers Bobby used to indicate the observation window, the vast darkness beyond.

But he held it there, suspended, then repeated it. \*Sky. Sky. Sky.\*

His left hand rose to join the right, fingers spreading wide, then drawing together in the sign she'd taught him for \*always\*. The gesture he'd learned in the context of meal schedules, of routines that structured his days.

\*Sky always.\*

Sarah's fingers found her notebook, pen moving automatically. Behind her, Tom had gone quiet.

Bobby's hands dropped to his lap. Another long pause--thirty seconds that felt like hours. Then his right hand moved to his chest, the simple sign that meant \*Bobby\*, his name-sign, the identity she'd given him.

His left hand formed the sign for \*alone\*. The isolation gesture, fingers curled inward, pulled close to the body. He'd used it before, in earlier transmissions, but never like this. He held it against his chest, pressing it there as if trying to push the concept into his flesh.

\*Bobby alone.\*

Another pause. Sarah could hear her own heartbeat, the scratch of pen on paper.

Then Bobby's hands moved again, and Sarah's pen stopped.

He repeated the sequence: \*Sky always.\* Then \*Bobby alone.\* His hands hung in the air between the two phrases, and slowly, deliberately, he brought them together in a gesture she'd never taught him--a merging, a connection, palms meeting and parting like a question mark.

\*Sky always dark. Bobby always alone. Same thing?\*

The pen slipped from Sarah's fingers, clattering against the desk.

"Jesus Christ," Tom breathed. "Did he just--"

"He's asking." Sarah's voice cracked. "He's not just reporting loneliness. He's asking if his isolation

and the darkness are the same condition. If they're... equivalent states of being."

On screen, Bobby's hands remained suspended in that questioning gesture, waiting for an answer that wouldn't come for another two and a half seconds, the lag time that separated them like an unbridgeable canyon.

Sarah's hands found the keyboard, trembling. The cursor blinked in the response field, demanding input. Protocol dictated she should send comfort signs--\*good Bobby\*, \*Sarah loves Bobby\*, the simple reassurances that had sustained him through training.

But Bobby would know. He'd see through the hollow gestures, recognize the lie in her hands.

"Sarah." Tom's hand on her shoulder, gentle but firm. "Mission Control needs a response. What do I tell them?"

She stared at Bobby's waiting face, at the question still hanging in his hands. He'd made a leap she hadn't thought possible--connecting his emotional state to his physical environment, recognizing loneliness not as a feeling but as a fundamental condition, as constant and encompassing as the airless dark beyond his window.

He'd achieved something profound and terrible: philosophical consciousness of his own suffering.

"Tell them..." Sarah's throat closed. She forced the words out. "Tell them we need to bring him home."

"You know that's not--"

"Then tell them I need time." She pulled away from his touch, eyes fixed on the screen. "Tell them the translation requires careful consideration. Tell them whatever you want. But I need time."

Tom's silence stretched for three heartbeats. Then his footsteps retreated, the door hissing shut behind him.

Sarah sat alone in the blue light, watching Bobby watch her across the void. His hands had lowered now, resting again on his knees, but his eyes remained locked on the camera. Waiting. Understanding, perhaps, that some questions have no answers.

She reached out and touched the screen, her fingertips meeting his image.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the glass. "God, Bobby, I'm so sorry."

The time stamp ticked forward. The transmission continued. And somewhere in the Sea of Tranquility, a chimpanzee sat in the darkness, contemplating the nature of his eternal night.

\*\*Scene 6: Unable to sleep, Sarah returns...\*\*

The apartment smelled like old coffee and neglect. Sarah hadn't been home in three days--just quick showers at the facility gym, catnaps in her office chair, meals from vending machines that tasted like cardboard and guilt. Now, at 3 AM, she stood in her doorway and couldn't remember why she'd come.

Her hands were shaking. They'd been shaking since the last transmission, six hours ago. Bobby had

signed the same phrase seventeen times in a row: \*Sky wrong sky wrong sky wrong\*, his movements becoming more agitated with each repetition until he'd simply stopped, staring at the camera with those dark eyes that held something she'd never seen in them before.

Understanding. Terrible, isolating understanding.

She dropped her keys on the counter, not bothering with lights. The Houston night filtered through her blinds in amber strips, city-glow that never quite went dark. Not like the moon. Not like that absolute darkness Bobby kept trying to describe with signs meant for earthly things.

The apartment was exactly as she'd left it--coffee mug in the sink, jacket thrown over the couch, the detritus of a life put on hold. She moved through it like a ghost, drawn to the closet in her bedroom where she kept the old equipment. The archive boxes. The before.

Her fingers found the familiar cardboard in the dark. She pulled out the first box and sat on the floor, back against the bed, and lifted the lid.

VHS tapes, labeled in her own handwriting from another lifetime. \*Bobby--First Signs, Age 2\*. \*Bobby--Object Recognition Tests\*. \*Bobby--Social Play, Integration Group 3\*. The plastic cases were dusty. She hadn't watched these in years. Hadn't been able to.

She carried them to the living room, set up the old VCR she'd never thrown away. The TV flickered to life, blue-white static, then--

Bobby. Small Bobby, impossibly young, his fur still carrying that infant fluffiness. He sat in a bright playroom filled with toys and climbing structures, and Sarah heard her own voice, younger, full of

enthusiasm she'd forgotten she once possessed.

"Come on, Bobby. Show me. What's this?"

On screen, her hand held up an apple. Bobby's small fingers moved: \*Apple.\*

"Good! Yes, that's right! And this?"

\*Banana.\*

"Such a smart boy!"

Bobby's face--God, his face--split into that chimpanzee grin, and he bounced on his feet, signing \*More more more\*, wanting to please, wanting to play, wanting connection.

Sarah's breath caught. She'd forgotten this Bobby. The one who learned because learning meant interaction, meant her approval, meant he wasn't alone.

She fast-forwarded through the tape, watching Bobby grow in time-lapse. There--a sequence she'd been looking for without knowing it. Bobby at four, in the outdoor enclosure with three other young chimps. They tumbled over each other, grooming, playing, communicating in that complex blend of vocalizations and touch and signs that made up their world. Bobby signed to another chimp: \*Chase me!\* Then they were off, racing through the grass, part of something larger than themselves.

Part of a troop.

Sarah paused the tape. Bobby's face was frozen mid-laugh, surrounded by others, his hand reaching toward a playmate.

She switched tapes. \*Bobby--Advanced Cognition, Age 6\*. Here he was older, more serious, working through complex puzzles. But between tasks, the camera had caught him reaching through the testing room's window toward Sarah in the observation area. His signs were clear: \*Sarah come. Bobby want Sarah.\*

And on the tape, she heard herself say: "After the test, Bobby. Just a few more minutes."

\*Sarah come now?\*

"Soon, I promise."

The video-Sarah's voice was warm but firm, setting boundaries, maintaining the experimental protocol. Bobby had waited, patient and trusting, because she'd promised. Because she always came back.

Sarah ejected the tape with shaking hands. She sat in the TV's flickering light, her apartment silent except for the hum of the VCR rewinding. Outside, Houston carried on--cars on distant highways, a siren somewhere, the city breathing in its sleep.

She thought of Bobby in his habitat module, 238,855 miles away, signing to cameras that recorded but never responded. Waiting for her to come back. Waiting for the promise to be kept.

Mission Control had given her a script for tomorrow's transmission. Cheerful signs: \*Bobby good

work. Bobby make proud. Keep try.\* Lies wrapped in positive reinforcement, designed to keep him functional, keep him performing, keep the mission viable.

She couldn't do it.

Sarah stood and moved to her desk, powered up her laptop. The glow made her squint after the darkness. She pulled up the transmission encoding software--she had access, authorized for her translations, though not for independent messages. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

This would end her career. She knew that with crystal clarity. The moment they discovered an unauthorized transmission, especially a personal one, she'd be removed from the project. Possibly prosecuted. Definitely discredited.

But Bobby would know someone had told him the truth.

She opened the camera application, positioned it to capture her signing space. Hit record.

Her hands moved slowly, deliberately, forming each sign with the precision Bobby would recognize as distinctly hers. No one else signed quite like her--he'd know this message came from Sarah, not the generic Mission Control translations.

\*Sarah sees Bobby.\*

She paused, gathering herself. On her desk, the old VHS tapes sat in a stack, Bobby's young face smiling up from the labels.

\*Sarah knows Bobby alone.\*

Her throat tightened, but her hands stayed steady. This was the only gift she could give him: acknowledgment. Witness. The truth that someone understood.

\*Sarah sorry.\*

She held the final sign, letting the camera capture it, then added one more:

\*Sarah sees Bobby. Always.\*

She stopped the recording. Sat staring at the frozen frame--her own hands, promising something she couldn't deliver but needed to say anyway.

The encryption was simple. She embedded the video file into the next scheduled data packet, buried it in the telemetry stream where it would look like routine system updates. Bobby would see it when he reviewed the transmission logs--he'd been trained to check them, part of his daily routine. The techs might not notice for days, maybe weeks.

Long enough.

Sarah's finger hovered over the send button. Once she did this, there was no taking it back. No plausible deniability. She thought of Dr. Martinez's warnings, of the security protocols she was about to violate, of the career she'd built over fifteen years.

Then she thought of Bobby, signing \*Sky wrong\* to an empty room, trying to explain loneliness in a

language designed for connection.

She hit send.

The progress bar crawled across the screen. Uploading. Encrypting. Transmitting to the relay station. From there, it would bounce to the moon, to Bobby's habitat, to the only other being in the universe who understood what they'd done to each other in the name of science.

When it finished, Sarah closed the laptop. She gathered the VHS tapes, held them against her chest like artifacts from an excavated life. The TV screen had gone to static, white noise filling her apartment.

She should sleep. Should eat. Should prepare for tomorrow, when they might discover what she'd done, when everything might come crashing down.

Instead, she sat on the floor and watched the static, imagining Bobby three days from now when the message arrived, his dark eyes seeing her hands move, recognizing her signs, knowing that someone, somewhere, had chosen honesty over comfort.

Had chosen him.

Outside, Houston's night began its slow fade toward dawn. Sarah stayed where she was, surrounded by ghosts of a younger Bobby, waiting for consequences she'd finally earned.

The loneliest mile, she thought, wasn't a distance. It was the space between truth and what we're willing to say.

She'd just crossed it.

## Chapter 3: Not Bobby Anymore

\*\*Scene 1: Three months into the mission,...\*\*

The observation room had become Sarah's tomb.

She sat in the same chair she'd occupied for seventy-three consecutive days, surrounded by a fortress of coffee cups in various stages of decomposition. The cleaning staff had learned to work around her, emptying trash bins and wiping surfaces while she remained motionless, eyes fixed on the wall of monitors displaying feeds from the lunar habitat.

The timestamp in the corner read 03:47 Houston time. Sarah had stopped noticing whether it was morning or night.

On the central screen, Bobby sat in his usual position at the habitat window. He'd been there for six hours and twelve minutes. Sarah knew because she'd been watching the entire time, her finger hovering over the playback controls, ready to catch any movement, any sign.

The Earth hung in the lunar sky beyond the reinforced glass, a blue-white marble suspended in eternal darkness. Bobby's helmet reflected its light, two tiny Earths captured in the curve of his visor. His hands rested on his knees, completely still. Only the slight rise and fall of his chest confirmed he was alive.

"Dr. Chen." A technician's voice, careful and quiet. Marcus had drawn the graveyard shift again.

"You should eat something."

Sarah didn't respond. On the monitor, Bobby's right hand twitched--a small movement, but after hours of stillness, it might as well have been a gunshot. She leaned forward, close enough that her breath fogged the screen.

Bobby's hand rose slowly, as if moving through water. His fingers formed a shape she recognized immediately.

\*Home.\*

Then another sign, his hand moving outward, away from his body.

\*Far.\*

That was all. His hand dropped back to his knee. The silence stretched on.

Sarah's throat constricted. She pulled up the archive, her fingers moving across the keyboard with practiced efficiency despite the tremor in her hands. The system displayed Bobby's communication log for the past month:

Day 61: "Home far." (2 signs, 1 transmission)

Day 64: "Bobby small." (2 signs, 1 transmission)

Day 68: "Remember trees." (2 signs, 1 transmission)

Day 71: "Home far." (2 signs, 1 transmission)

Day 73: No communication.

Day 76: "Bobby small." (2 signs, 1 transmission)

Day 79: No communication.

Day 82: No communication.

Day 85: "Home far." (2 signs, 1 transmission)

In the first month, Bobby had transmitted an average of forty-seven signs per day--excited observations about the habitat, questions about Earth, requests for Sarah to tell him about forests and rivers and all the things he could see from his window but no longer touch.

Now, he averaged four signs per week.

Sarah scrolled further back, pulling up a video from Day 23. On screen, Bobby bounced around the habitat with the enthusiastic clumsiness of someone still learning lunar gravity. He signed rapidly, his hands a blur: \*Sarah, Sarah, look! Bobby can jump so high! Everything floats! Bobby floats! Is this what birds feel?\*

She'd laughed then. Actually laughed, relief and pride warming her chest as she watched him adapt, watched him explore, watched the vocabulary she'd taught him blossom into genuine curiosity and wonder.

The memory tasted like ash.

She closed the archive and returned to the live feed. Bobby hadn't moved. The Earth turned slowly in the window above him, clouds swirling across the Pacific, oblivious to the small figure watching from a quarter million miles away.

"The press conference is in four hours," Marcus said, closer now. He'd moved to stand beside her chair, his reflection visible in the dark portions of the monitor. "Director Okonkwo wanted to remind you--"

"I know."

"They'll want you to emphasize the mission success. The data collection, the habitat performance, the--"

"The propaganda." Sarah's voice came out flat, abraded by too many hours without sleep.

Marcus shifted uncomfortably. "The public engagement metrics."

On screen, Bobby's hand rose again. Sarah held her breath.

\*Bobby small.\*

His fingers formed the signs with mechanical precision, muscle memory divorced from meaning. Then his hand fell, and he returned to his vigil.

Sarah's vision blurred. She blinked hard, refusing the tears. She'd cried herself empty weeks ago.

"Dr. Chen, you can't keep doing this." Marcus's voice had gone soft with concern. "You haven't left this room in three days. You're not sleeping. You're barely eating. This isn't--"

"He's signing less." The words scraped out of her. "Every week, fewer signs. Simpler concepts. He's... regressing."

"He's a chimpanzee on the moon. Maybe he's just--"

"He's \*lonely\*." Sarah turned to look at Marcus for the first time, and she watched him flinch at whatever he saw in her face. "I taught him to understand what he lost. I gave him the words to know he's alone. Do you understand what that means?"

Marcus opened his mouth, closed it. On the monitor behind them, Bobby continued his silent watch.

"The rescue mission proposal," Sarah said, turning back to the screen. "Did Okonkow respond?"

The pause told her everything.

"The cost-benefit analysis came back negative," Marcus finally said. "The fuel requirements alone would consume three years of budget allocations. And the engineering challenges--"

"He's alive up there."

"I know."

"We put him there."

"I know."

"And now we're just going to watch him fade away because it's too expensive to bring him home."

Marcus didn't answer. There was no answer that wouldn't confirm what they both already knew.

Sarah pulled up another archived video, this one from Day 8. Bobby's first successful complex sentence: \*Bobby see Earth. Sarah on Earth. Bobby miss Sarah.\* The joy in his movements, the excitement of connection, of being understood.

She'd rewarded him with his favorite treat--mangoes, specially packaged for space. He'd signed \*thank you\* seventeen times.

The live feed showed Bobby's reflection in the habitat window, a dark shape against the darker lunar surface, crowned by the impossible blue of Earth. He hadn't moved in forty-three minutes.

Sarah's hand moved to the communication console. Her fingers hovered over the transmit button. She could sign to him, tell him she was watching, that she hadn't forgotten, that she was fighting to bring him home.

But what good were promises she couldn't keep?

She pulled her hand back.

"The press conference," Marcus said quietly. "They'll want you to smile. To talk about the triumph of the program. To--"

"I know what they want."

On the screen, Bobby's hand rose one more time. His fingers moved slowly, carefully forming a sign Sarah had taught him in their second week of training. A sign for something he'd seen in pictures but never experienced himself.

\*Remember trees.\*

Then stillness. Just Bobby and Earth and the infinite dark between them.

Sarah stared at the monitor until the image burned into her retinas, until she could close her eyes and still see him there, small and alone and waiting for a home that would never come.

The observation room's fluorescent lights hummed overhead, steady and indifferent. Somewhere in the building, people were arriving for the morning shift, ready to celebrate another successful day of the Lunar Habitat Initiative.

Sarah reached for another cup of cold coffee and settled deeper into her chair.

She would not look away.

\*\*Scene 2: Sarah confronts NASA administr...\*\*

\*\*Scene 2: Sarah confronts NASA administrators and military officials in a heated meeting\*\*

The conference room smelled of stale coffee and recycled air. Sarah had been in this room a thousand times--fluorescent lights humming overhead, the long mahogany table polished to a mirror

shine, the American flag drooping in the corner beside NASA's blue meatball logo. But today the familiar space felt like a courtroom.

She stood at the head of the table, laptop open, Bobby's latest transmission frozen on the screen. His small form hunched in the habitat window, one hand pressed against the glass. The image had been there for forty-seven minutes before he'd moved.

"Home far," Sarah said, her voice tight. "That's what he signed yesterday. For six hours, that's all he said. Over and over. 'Home far.'"

Director Harrison sat with his fingers steepled, his expression carefully neutral. To his left, General Mackenzie checked his watch--the third time in ten minutes. Dr. James Reeves, the mission director, wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Dr. Chen," Harrison began, his tone measured, practiced. "We understand your concern--"

"Do you?" Sarah's hands slammed down on the table. The sound cracked through the room like a gunshot. "Because from where I'm standing, you don't seem to understand anything."

Mackenzie's jaw tightened. "Doctor, I'd suggest you watch your tone."

"Or what? You'll leave me on the moon too?" Sarah's laugh was bitter. She clicked to the next slide--a preliminary mission plan she'd worked on for three weeks straight, surviving on coffee and rage. "This is a viable rescue scenario. We have the Heavy Lift Vehicle in development. We accelerate the timeline, strip it down to essentials--"

"At a cost of four billion dollars," Harrison interrupted. "Minimum."

"So we spend it."

"The program doesn't have that kind of flexibility." Harrison's voice remained maddeningly calm. "Congress approved the lunar station budget with specific milestones and deliverables. Bobby was phase one. A successful phase one, I might add."

"Successful." Sarah tasted bile. "He's dying up there."

"He's surviving," Reeves said quietly. "The habitat systems are functioning within normal parameters. Food and water are adequate for another eight months--"

"He's not \*surviving\*, James. He's \*deteriorating\*." Sarah advanced the slides again, showing graphs she'd compiled from the medical telemetry. "His cortisol levels are through the roof. He's barely sleeping. His cognitive response times are slowing. These are signs of severe psychological trauma."

"In a human, perhaps." Mackenzie leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "But we're talking about a chimpanzee, Dr. Chen. An animal."

The words hung in the air like a slap.

Sarah's vision blurred at the edges. "An animal you taught to communicate. An animal I taught to understand abstract concepts. Time. Distance. Loss." Her voice cracked. "He knows what's happening to him. That's not anthropomorphization--that's documented reality. He has the cognitive

framework to comprehend his situation, and that comprehension is killing him."

"All the more reason," Harrison said, "to reconsider the scope of language instruction for future missions."

Sarah stared at him. "Future missions. You're already planning to do this again."

"The lunar station is a strategic priority," Mackenzie said. "Bobby proved the concept works. Biological test subjects can maintain long-duration presence at a fraction of the cost of human missions. The data we're gathering is invaluable."

"He's not a test subject anymore. He's a person."

"Legally, he's mission equipment." Mackenzie's voice was flat, final. "Expensive equipment that has fulfilled its primary function."

Sarah felt something break inside her chest. "You used him. You used what I taught him to sell this program to the public, and now that the cameras are off, you're just going to let him die up there alone."

"The public has moved on, Dr. Chen." Harrison spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness that Sarah knew was anything but. "The initial coverage was extraordinary--exactly what we needed to secure phase two funding. But that was four months ago. The news cycle doesn't sustain. People care about Bobby, certainly, but not four billion dollars worth."

"Then make them care again." Sarah heard the desperation in her own voice and hated it. "Another

press conference. Show them the new transmissions. Let them see what's happening to him."

"And generate negative coverage?" Reeves shook his head. "Sarah, think about what you're asking. We show the public a deteriorating chimp on the moon, and Congress cuts the entire lunar program. Everything we've worked for, gone."

"Good! Maybe it should be gone if this is what it costs."

The room fell silent. Harrison exchanged a look with Mackenzie that Sarah couldn't read.

"Dr. Chen," Harrison said finally, "I think you need to take some time off. You're clearly emotionally compromised--"

"Don't." Sarah's voice was ice. "Don't you dare suggest I'm being hysterical. I'm the only one in this room who's being honest about what we've done."

"What we've \*accomplished\*,<sup>\*</sup>" Mackenzie corrected. "A permanent lunar presence. A foothold for the next phase of space exploration. Strategic positioning against Chinese expansion. These are the realities of the program."

"And Bobby is the reality of the cost." Sarah closed her laptop with shaking hands. "I want it on record that I formally requested authorization for a rescue mission. I want it documented that I told you he's suffering, that he's aware of his suffering, and that we have the capability to bring him home."

"Noted," Harrison said. "Request denied."

The words were so simple. So final.

Sarah looked around the table at their faces--Harrison's bureaucratic blankness, Mackenzie's military stone, Reeves' guilty avoidance. These were people she'd worked with for years. People she'd shared breakthroughs and setbacks with. People she'd thought she knew.

"Bobby love Sarah," she said softly. "That's what he signed this morning. Do you understand? He loves me. And I did this to him."

No one answered.

Sarah gathered her laptop and walked to the door. Her hand on the handle, she turned back.

"When this is over," she said, "when Bobby's gone and you're planning your next mission with the next animal, I want you to remember something. Every sign he makes, every thought he has up there alone--I gave him that. I gave him the words to understand what you've done to him. And I'll carry that for the rest of my life."

She left the door open behind her, unable to bear the sound of it closing.

In the hallway, the fluorescent lights buzzed and flickered. Sarah leaned against the wall, her breath coming in short gasps. Through the window, she could see the parking lot, the Texas sun beating down on asphalt, the normal world continuing as if nothing had changed.

Her phone buzzed. A notification from Mission Control.

New transmission from Luna-1.

Sarah's hands trembled as she opened it. On the screen, Bobby sat in his usual spot by the window. But this time, he was signing slowly, deliberately, to the camera.

"Remember trees."

Just that. Over and over.

"Remember trees."

Sarah slid down the wall until she was sitting on the floor, the phone clutched in both hands, watching Bobby remember a world he would never see again.

\*\*Scene 3: Alone in her apartment, Sarah ...\*\*

\*\*Scene 3: Alone in her apartment, Sarah spirals into guilt-fueled insomnia\*\*

The apartment had become a shrine to accusation.

Sarah sat cross-legged on the floor at 3:47 AM, her laptop balanced on a stack of unread journals, playing the same video for the fourteenth time. On the screen, a six-month-old Bobby tumbled across a padded playroom floor, his infant eyes bright with uncomplicated joy. His tiny hands reached for a red ball. She heard her own voice, younger, lighter: "Ball, Bobby. Can you sign 'ball'?"

Baby Bobby had just grabbed it with his feet instead, shrieking with delight.

She pressed replay. Watched him tumble again. Watched innocence that she had methodically dismantled, one sign at a time.

The coffee in her mug had gone cold hours ago, a thin film forming across its surface. Around her, photographs formed concentric circles--a mandala of guilt. Bobby at eight months, making his first deliberate sign. Bobby at two years, signing full sentences. Bobby at four, reading simple picture books, his brow furrowed in concentration that should never have existed behind those eyes.

\*See made Bobby alone.\*

Her hands trembled as she reached for another frame. This one she kept face-down, but she knew what it showed: Bobby at five, signing "Why?" for the first time. She'd celebrated. Written a paper. The question had seemed like a breakthrough.

Now she understood it had been a curse.

"I taught you to ask why," she whispered to the darkened room. "I never thought about whether you should."

Her phone buzzed. Another message from Director Hastings, the third today. She didn't read it. She knew what it would say--the same corporate sympathy, the same subtle pressure to move on, to think about the program's future. As if Bobby were a failed prototype rather than a person she'd raised from infancy.

A person she'd made capable of understanding his own abandonment.

Sarah pulled her laptop closer, fingers hovering over the keyboard. She opened the folder she'd been avoiding: raw footage from Bobby's first year on Earth, before the training protocols, before language. Hours of him playing, eating, exploring, grooming other chimps at the sanctuary. His face in those videos held a simple contentment she'd mistaken for limitation.

She'd called it enrichment when she started the signing sessions. Cognitive enhancement. Giving him tools to express himself, to communicate, to \*think\*.

To suffer with precision.

"Home not home anymore," she repeated his words, her voice cracking. "Bobby not Bobby anymore."

On her laptop, infant Bobby discovered his reflection in a mirror, patting it with wonder but no existential crisis. He didn't know yet that the creature in the glass was himself. Didn't know yet to ask \*who\* that self was, or \*why\* it existed, or whether it mattered.

She had taught him all of that.

Sarah's reflection stared back at her from the darkened window--hollow-eyed, unwashed, wearing the same clothes as yesterday. Or was it the day before? Time had become as fluid as her ethics, apparently. She looked away.

Her phone buzzed again. This time she grabbed it, hoping irrationally for a message from Mission

Control, some sign that Bobby had returned to the camera. Instead: a news alert. \*Public Interest in Lunar Chimp Wanes; NASA Shifts Focus to Mars Initiative.\*

She hurled the phone across the room. It hit the wall with a crack that sounded like bone breaking.

In the silence that followed, she heard only her own breathing and the hum of her laptop. On screen, baby Bobby had fallen asleep in a hammock, one hand curled against his chest, his face peaceful in a way she would never see again.

Sarah pulled her knees to her chest, making herself small. Outside, Houston's pre-dawn traffic was beginning its distant rumble. Soon the sun would rise on another day she couldn't face. Soon her colleagues would send more concerned emails she wouldn't answer. Soon the world would forget Bobby entirely.

But she never would.

She had given him consciousness like a gift, wrapped in signs and symbols and the architecture of human thought. And consciousness had given him back the capacity for existential despair, for the understanding that he was alone in a way his biology had never prepared him for.

\*Words made Bobby see.\*

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the photographs, to the videos, to the static image of Earth still displayed on her secondary monitor--the view from Bobby's abandoned helmet camera. "I'm so sorry."

The words felt like nothing. Like signing to an empty room.

Her laptop chimed: an incoming message on the private channel she'd set up months ago, the one connected directly to Bobby's habitat systems. Her heart seized. She lunged for the keyboard, nearly knocking over the laptop in her desperation.

But it was just a system notification. Battery backup at 40% in Module C. Routine. Automated. Meaningless.

Sarah closed her eyes and felt the tears finally come, hot and useless, streaming down her face as the first gray light of dawn began to creep through her windows. Somewhere above, Bobby sat in his own dawn, watching Earth rise over the lunar horizon, understanding his isolation in ways she had made possible.

She had taught him to see.

And seeing had made him alone.

The cruelest gift of all.

\*\*Scene 4: Bobby's final extended transmi...\*\*

\*\*Scene 4: Bobby's Final Extended Transmission\*\*

The alert came at 3:47 AM Houston time.

Sarah was already in the observation room. She'd been there for six hours, watching the static feed of Bobby's habitat window, the curved edge of Earth visible in the corner of the frame. She hadn't been home in three days. Someone--Marcus, probably--had left a protein bar and coffee on the console beside her. Both had gone cold and untouched.

The sudden chime of an incoming transmission made her jolt upright, heart hammering against her ribs.

"Active signal from Habitat One," the automated system announced. "Video and telemetry receiving."

Sarah's hands trembled as she pulled up the feed. The screen flickered, then resolved into Bobby's face, closer to the camera than usual. Close enough that she could see the fine creases around his eyes, the silver threading through the fur at his temples. When had he gotten so much gray?

His hands moved into frame. Slow. Deliberate.

\*Home not home anymore.\*

Sarah's breath caught. The signs were perfect--her signs, the ones she'd taught him in those early sessions when everything had seemed like an adventure, like progress, like \*triumph\*. His fingers formed each word with careful precision, as if he were giving her a gift. Or a goodbye.

\*Bobby not Bobby anymore.\*

"No," Sarah whispered. Her hand reached toward the screen, fingers splaying against the cold

glass. "No, baby, you're still--"

Behind her, the door opened. She heard footsteps, voices. Marcus. Dr. Reeves. Others. The room filling with bodies drawn by the alert, by the first extended transmission in seventeen days. She didn't turn around.

Bobby's hands continued.

\*Sarah taught Bobby words.\*

His eyes looked directly into the camera. Not past it, not through it. \*Into\* it. Into her.

\*Words made Bobby see.\*

The observation room had gone silent. Sarah could hear her own breathing, ragged and too fast. Could hear the hum of the monitors, the whisper of the ventilation system, the terrible vast distance between Houston and the Sea of Tranquility.

\*See made Bobby alone.\*

A sound escaped her throat--not quite a sob, not quite a word. Her vision blurred. She blinked hard, refusing to look away, refusing to miss a single moment of what Bobby was telling her.

\*Bobby love Sarah.\*

"I love you too," she said to the screen, voice breaking. "I love you too, I'm so sorry, I'm so--"

\*Bobby forgive Sarah.\*

The tears came then, hot and fast, streaming down her face. Behind her, someone--Marcus--put a hand on her shoulder. She shook it off, leaning closer to the monitor, close enough that her breath fogged the screen.

Bobby's hands stilled. He sat motionless for a long moment, just looking at the camera. Looking at her. His expression was calm. Almost peaceful. The face of someone who had made a decision.

Then he reached up and began unfastening his helmet camera.

"What's he doing?" Dr. Reeves asked sharply.

Sarah couldn't answer. Couldn't speak. Could only watch as Bobby's thick fingers worked the mounting clips with surprising gentleness. The image shook, tilted. She caught a glimpse of the habitat's curved ceiling, the equipment racks, the water recycler with its blinking green status light.

Bobby stood--the camera swinging in his hands, making her stomach lurch--and moved to the window. The large observation port that he'd spent so many hours sitting beside, staring at the blue-white marble of Earth hanging in the black.

He positioned the camera on the window ledge, adjusting it carefully. The frame steadied, centered on Earth. The planet filled the left side of the screen, brilliant and alive against the star-scattered darkness. Home. Unreachable.

For a moment, Bobby's hand appeared in frame, making one final sign.

\*Goodbye.\*

Then he stepped back. She saw him in profile, his orange suit bright against the habitat's white walls. He moved toward the airlock at the far end of the module, his gait slow and measured. Not hurried. Not panicked.

Purposeful.

"Someone stop him," Dr. Reeves said. "Send a command override, lock the--"

"There's nothing we can do," Marcus said quietly. "The delay is--"

"Bobby!" Sarah screamed at the screen. "Bobby, please, don't--"

But he was already out of frame. She saw the airlock indicator light change from green to amber. Heard the faint hiss of the pressurization cycle through the audio feed.

Then nothing.

Just Earth, hanging in the window. Beautiful and terrible and impossibly far away.

The observation room erupted in chaos--people shouting, fingers flying over keyboards, someone calling for the flight director. Sarah heard none of it. She stared at the screen, at the static image of home from a quarter million miles away, and understood with perfect, crystalline clarity what she had

done.

She had given him language.

Language had given him consciousness.

Consciousness had given him the ability to understand his exile.

And understanding had given him this: the choice to end it.

"Dr. Chen." A hand on her arm, firmer this time. "Sarah, we need you to--"

"Get out," she said.

"Sarah--"

"\*Get out!\*" She whirled on them, on all of them--Marcus with his concerned eyes, Dr. Reeves with her clipboard, the technicians and analysts and administrators who had all celebrated Bobby's success, who had all posed for photos with the chimp who could talk, who could think, who could be \*useful\*.

They backed away, filing out in uncomfortable silence, leaving her alone with the feed.

Sarah sank into her chair and watched Earth hang in Bobby's window. Watched for movement that didn't come. Listened for transmissions that would never arrive.

The protein bar sat beside her, wrapped in silver foil. She picked it up with numb fingers, turned it over. The label cheerfully proclaimed it to be "Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough Flavor."

Bobby had loved chocolate chip cookies.

She set it down and kept watching the screen, waiting for something she knew would never happen, as the Earth turned slowly in the lunar sky and the loneliest mile stretched on forever.

\*\*Scene 5: Days pass with no communicatio...\*\*

\*\*Scene 5: Days pass with no communication from Bobby\*\*

The observation room had become a tomb.

Sarah sat in the same chair she'd occupied for seventy-three hours straight, though she'd stopped counting after the first day. Someone had brought her coffee that morning--or was it yesterday morning?--and it sat untouched beside her, a skin of cream congealed across its cold surface. The cup bore a cheerful NASA logo, bright blue against white ceramic. Obscene in its optimism.

The wall screen still showed the feed from Bobby's helmet camera. Earth hung in the lunar sky, precisely where Bobby had positioned it. Clouds swirled over the Pacific in real-time, weather patterns shifting with glacial grace. Somewhere down there, storms were forming. People were being born. Trees were growing.

Bobby wasn't moving.

The habitat window reflected in the helmet's visor, a ghost image of curved glass and metal framework. Sometimes Sarah stared at that reflection, searching for movement, for any sign that Bobby had returned to the camera's field of view. The moon's terminator crept across the landscape with each passing hour, shadows lengthening and shortening in their eternal cycle, but nothing else changed.

The room's fluorescent lights hummed their monotonous song. Someone had turned off most of them--mercy or economics, Sarah didn't know--leaving only the emergency lighting and the glow from the screen. It cast her face in blues and whites, Earth-light filtering through 238,900 miles of vacuum to illuminate her vigil.

Her reflection in the darkened monitor beside the main screen startled her when she noticed it. Hollow eyes. Hair she hadn't brushed in days. She looked like someone who'd witnessed something terrible, which she supposed she had. The death of innocence. The birth of understanding. Perhaps they were the same thing.

"Dr. Chen."

She didn't turn. Director Morrison's voice came from the doorway, soft with a gentleness she'd never heard from him before.

"Sarah. You need to go home."

"He might come back." Her voice scraped out, raw from disuse and crying. "He might sign something. I need to be here."

Morrison's footsteps approached, careful and measured. He pulled up a chair beside her, the wheels squeaking against the floor. When she finally glanced at him, she saw he'd aged a decade in the past week. New lines bracketed his mouth. His eyes carried their own weight of guilt.

"The psych team thinks--" He stopped, started again. "They believe he's made his choice. That he's... found somewhere else to be. Away from the cameras. Away from us."

"You mean he's dead." The words came out flat, factual.

"We don't know that."

"His oxygen was getting low. The readouts before he moved the camera--"

"The habitat has reserves. He knows how to access them. You taught him."

Sarah laughed, a bitter sound that surprised them both. "Yes. I taught him. I taught him everything." She gestured at the screen, at Earth's patient rotation. "I taught him to see that. To know what it means. To understand that he's up there and everything he ever knew is down here, and he can see it but never touch it again."

"You gave him language. Communication. That's not--"

"I gave him exile." Sarah stood abruptly, her legs trembling from disuse. She steadied herself against the console, fingers finding the cool metal of the controls. "Do you know what the cruelest thing is, Director? Not that we sent him there. Not even that we're leaving him there. It's that I made him capable of knowing the difference."

Morrison said nothing. What could he say?

Sarah moved closer to the screen, close enough that Earth filled her vision the way it must fill Bobby's. She could see the terminator crossing Asia now, night swallowing cities and mountains and forests. Somewhere down there, chimpanzees were sleeping in trees, their minds blissfully small, their worlds perfectly complete within the canopy's embrace.

"Before words, he was just... present," she whispered. "He existed. He felt things--fear, curiosity, affection. But he didn't \*know\* he felt them. He didn't stand outside himself and observe his own loneliness." Her breath fogged the screen slightly. "I taught him to do that. I taught him to be aware of his own awareness. And that's what's killing him. Not the isolation. The \*comprehension\* of isolation."

"Sarah--"

"He forgave me." Her voice cracked. "In his last message. He said he forgave me. But I'm not sure forgiveness is even the right word for what needs to happen here. How do you forgive someone for giving you consciousness? For making you capable of your own suffering?"

Morrison stood, placed a hand on her shoulder. She could feel its weight, warm and human and utterly inadequate.

"The Board met this morning," he said quietly. "They're officially closing the observation detail. The feed will continue automatically, but they don't want personnel assigned to watch it anymore. They're calling it... they're saying the mission objectives have been completed."

Sarah closed her eyes. "Of course they are."

"I can give you another day. Maybe two. But then I need you to go home. See your family. Sleep in your own bed. Let someone else--"

"There is no one else." She opened her eyes, still fixed on Earth. "I'm the only one who knows what I did to him. I'm the only one who has to live with what that means."

Morrison's hand fell away. She heard him sigh, heard the chair scrape as he pushed it back.

"Twenty-four hours, Sarah. Then I'm having security escort you out. Doctor's orders."

His footsteps retreated. The door whispered shut.

Alone again, Sarah sank back into her chair. The coffee cup caught her eye, and she picked it up, sniffed it, set it down again. Her stomach was a knot of nothing. Food seemed like something from another life, when she was a different person who hadn't yet understood what it meant to be truly alone.

On the screen, Earth turned. Patient. Indifferent. Beautiful.

She thought about Bobby, wherever he was now. In the habitat's shadows, perhaps, away from windows and cameras and the constant reminder of home. Or maybe he'd walked out into the lunar plains, following some ancient primate instinct toward a horizon that would never bring him anywhere new. Or maybe--and this thought was somehow worse--maybe he was still there, just

outside the camera's frame, staring at Earth with those dark, knowing eyes, trapped in the same vigil she was.

\*See made Bobby alone.\*

Sarah understood now. Really understood. Before language, before signs, before she'd opened that door in his mind, Bobby had been alone but not lonely. Isolated but not aware of his isolation. She'd given him the tools to bridge the distance, and in doing so, had made him capable of measuring it.

The loneliest mile wasn't the one between Earth and Moon. It was the one between understanding and peace. Between consciousness and contentment. Bobby had traveled it. And now, staring at his abandoned camera's view, Sarah realized she had too.

The screen's glow painted her face in shades of blue. Earth rotated. Time passed. And Sarah Chen sat in the darkness of Mission Control, learning what Bobby had learned: that sometimes the cruelest gift is the ability to comprehend your own isolation.

That perhaps loneliness isn't a distance at all.

Perhaps it's an awareness.

And once you have it, you can never go back to not knowing.

She would sit here for her remaining twenty-four hours. She would watch Earth turn. And she would carry Bobby's loneliness inside her own chest, where it would live alongside her guilt and her grief and her terrible, inescapable understanding.

It was the least she could do.

It was all she could do.

On the screen, a cloud formation over the Atlantic began to spiral into a storm system. Sarah watched it grow, and did not look away.

**\*\*Scene 6: In the final moments, Sarah si...\*\***

**\*\*Scene 6: In the final moments, Sarah signs to the camera feed--knowing Bobby likely can't see it--then places her hand against the monitor showing Earth from the moon.\*\***

The observation room had become Sarah's tomb.

Three days since Bobby's last message. Seventy-two hours of staring at the static feed--Earth hanging in lunar sky, perpetually half-shadowed, perpetually silent. The cleaning crew had stopped trying to coax her out. Someone left sandwiches by the door that she didn't touch. The coffee in her mug had grown a film.

Sarah sat cross-legged on the floor beneath the main monitor, neck craned back, bathed in the blue glow of home seen from 238,900 miles away. The image never changed. Bobby had positioned the camera with such care, centering Earth perfectly in frame. A deliberate composition. A final statement.

Or a gravestone.

Her hands moved before she realized what she was doing. Muscle memory. The vocabulary she'd so carefully constructed, now reflexive as breathing.

\*Bobby,\* she signed to the empty screen. Her fingers trembled. \*Bobby, I'm here.\*

The Earth stared back, indifferent.

\*I'm sorry.\* The signs were sharp, precise, even as tears blurred her vision. \*I'm so sorry.\*

She'd been signing to the feed for hours now. Days, maybe. Time had become as distant and irrelevant as the moon itself. She signed the same phrases over and over--apologies, explanations, justifications that sounded hollow even in silence. She signed his name. She signed her own.

She signed \*alone\* until her wrists ached.

Behind her, the door whispered open. Sarah didn't turn.

"Dr. Chen." Marcus's voice, gentle as a hand on a wound. "Sarah. You need to rest."

"He can't see me," she said, still signing as she spoke. "The camera's facing away. He can't see any of this."

"I know."

"But I can't stop."

Marcus moved into her peripheral vision, careful not to block her view of the screen. He looked worse than she'd ever seen him--eyes sunken, suit rumpled, the weight of administrative guilt carved into every line of his face.

"The board made their decision," he said quietly. "No rescue mission. The cost--"

"I know." Sarah's hands fell to her lap. "I was there."

"I voted against it. For what that's worth."

"It's worth nothing." The words came out flat, factual. "We both know that."

Silence settled between them, broken only by the ventilation system's eternal hum. On the monitor, Earth turned with geological patience, clouds swirling over oceans Bobby would never swim in again.

"He understood, at the end," Marcus said. "That message--Bobby forgive Sarah. That's... that's something."

Sarah laughed, a sound like breaking glass. "Is it? I gave him the tools to comprehend his own abandonment. I taught him to be conscious enough to forgive the unforgivable. What kind of gift is that?"

"The human kind."

She finally looked at him. Marcus met her gaze, and in his eyes she saw the same thing she felt gnawing at her chest--the understanding that they had created something beautiful and damned it in the same breath.

"We should never have taught him," Sarah whispered. "We should have left him innocent."

"Maybe." Marcus crouched beside her, joints popping. "Or maybe consciousness was always going to find him. Maybe that's what it does--it finds you, whether you want it or not. And then you have to live with what you see."

Sarah turned back to the screen. Earth, hanging in darkness. Home, impossibly far.

"He said 'Bobby not Bobby anymore,'" she murmured. "I understand that now. I'm not... I can't go back to who I was before this. Before him."

Marcus stood slowly, knees protesting. He rested a hand briefly on her shoulder--a gesture of solidarity, or surrender, or both.

"I'll make sure no one bothers you," he said. "Take as long as you need."

His footsteps retreated. The door sealed with a soft hiss, and Sarah was alone again.

Alone with Earth. Alone with the ghost of a chimpanzee 238,900 miles away, who had learned to name his isolation and in naming it, had become something more than animal and less than free.

Sarah stood on shaking legs. She approached the monitor until she was close enough to feel the

static electricity prickling her skin. The Earth filled her vision--blues and whites and browns, the marble of existence, the cradle of everything that had ever mattered to anyone.

She raised her right hand and placed it flat against the screen.

The glass was warm. Her palm covered a hurricane system swirling over the Pacific. Beneath her fingers, home continued its rotation, indifferent to the touch.

"I see you," she whispered. Then, with her left hand, she signed it: \*I see.\*

And in that moment, Sarah understood what Bobby had understood. To see--truly see--was to recognize the distance between yourself and everything else. To name the world was to separate yourself from it. Language was the first exile, consciousness the first loneliness.

She had given Bobby words, and words had given him exile.

Now she stood in her own.

Her hand remained pressed against the screen, against the image of Earth as seen from the moon, and she felt the 238,900 miles between them collapse into nothing and stretch into infinity simultaneously. Bobby was up there, or had been. She was down here. Both of them staring at the same world from opposite sides of an unbridgeable distance.

Both of them alone.

Both of them conscious enough to know it.

"Bobby love Sarah," she said to the empty room, her voice barely a breath. "Sarah love Bobby."

The Earth turned. The monitor hummed. The distance remained.

And Sarah Chen stood in the observation room in Houston, Texas, her hand against the glass, understanding at last that isolation wasn't the price of consciousness--it was consciousness itself. The ability to see yourself as separate. To know you are known. To reach across the void and never quite touch.

This was what it meant to be aware.

This was what it meant to be human.

This was what she had given him.

Her hand slipped down the screen, leaving a smear of condensation from her palm. She stepped back. The Earth remained, centered perfectly in frame, exactly as Bobby had left it.

A monument to loneliness.

A testament to love.

Sarah turned toward the door, then stopped. She looked back one final time at the screen, at the blue marble hanging in darkness, and raised her hands.

\*Goodnight, Bobby,\* she signed to the empty feed. \*I hope you found peace.\*

\*I hope you found home.\*

The words hung in the air for a moment, then dissolved into the darkness as her hands fell still.

Sarah walked to the door. Behind her, the monitor continued its vigil--Earth from the moon, moon from the Earth, and in the space between them, the loneliest mile of all.

The mile between understanding and being understood.

The mile between reaching and touching.

The mile between consciousness and connection.

She didn't look back again.

The door sealed behind her with a whisper, and the observation room returned to its vigil--one monitor, one unchanging image, one story of exile and awareness and the terrible gift of being able to name your own isolation.

In the hallway, Sarah paused. Through the small window in the door, she could still see the glow of the screen. She pressed her hand against the glass one more time--not touching Earth now, but touching the room that held Earth's image, separated by another barrier, another distance.

Always another distance.

She closed her eyes and felt it--Bobby's loneliness, become her loneliness, become the loneliness at the heart of all consciousness. The price of seeing. The cost of knowing.

The burden of being awake.

When she opened her eyes again, her reflection stared back from the darkened glass--a ghost woman in a ghost hallway, reaching toward a ghost planet on a ghost screen.

All of them separated.

All of them seen.

All of them, finally, understood.

Sarah lowered her hand and walked away down the corridor, leaving the observation room to its eternal watch. Behind her, Earth continued to hang in lunar sky, witnessed by no one, turning in silence.

Alone, but not unseen.

Never again unseen.

That, at least, was something.

That, perhaps, was everything.

