

SIGNS OF LIFE

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SIGNS OF LIFE

The air in the halls of Watchpoint: Gibraltar was stale. There was a familiar static to it that permeated the base and clung to Juno's skin. It provided a small amount of comfort, but it was still nothing like home.

In the months since she'd arrived on Earth, Juno Teo Minh had found it beautiful but overwhelming. Of course, living on Mars had never been easy, even with her family there to support her. Project Red Promise's terraforming initiative had caused horrific dust storms that threatened the colony's safety and ultimately led Juno's family to build her the ship that brought her to Earth. Still, there had been peace in her former life, putting on the same suit and eating the same rations—coming home to the same quarters and sleeping under the same twin moons.

Juno thought leaving Mars was hard enough, but braving Earth on her own proved harder still. Her mother had only asked one thing of her when she left: to live a long, happy life. But how could Juno be happy while her family was in danger? She needed to save the colony—her *home*. If she couldn't . . .

The thought set her mind adrift as she made her way toward the command center.

Mei's voice came from down the hall. "Juno, is that you?"

Juno straightened up, lengthening her stride to give the appearance of confidence. "Yes, I am on my way!"

When Juno reached the door, Mei wasn't the only one waiting for her. Cassidy leaned against a railing at the top of the stairs with Pharah; Echo was hovering behind Winston's shoulder, pointing things out on a map in front of them; and Efi was sitting with Sojourn at a conference table, scrolling through a holo-pad filled with data. Ever since the Null Sector withdrawal, the base felt lighter, more lively. Overwatch had made it through, and now the team—the world—could heal.

At the sight of Juno, Winston perked up, adjusting his glasses before padding across the room to meet her. "Juno! How are you doing today?"

Winston and Juno had spoken often about the trip over the past few days. He had been eager to help her prepare and was not afraid to share his own experience with Lucheng Interstellar. On the whole, Winston had been supportive—always trying to keep the tone hopeful and encourage Juno to feel confident in the journey. But Juno knew enough about Horizon Lunar Colony to understand that Winston's own history with Lucheng was complicated. Even now, as he greeted her with a smile, she could tell he was putting up a positive front.

"I am excited, of course! But . . ." Juno exchanged a quick glance with Mei. "I am also quite nervous. I do not know any of these people. What if they do not agree to help us?"

"Well, Lucheng knows more about the Mars colony than anyone else on Earth, except for you," Mei assured her. "And you have information they'll probably want to know too."

This was, objectively, true. In their brief communications with Lucheng Interstellar, the company had seemed just as supportive, citing their continued dedication to scientific research. After all, both sides stood to benefit a great deal from an exchange of information. Juno had questions regarding the communications failure that had seemingly stranded her family on Mars without resources, and Lucheng's chairperson and CEO, Dr. Chao, was one of the few people on Earth who might have the answers she sought. Perhaps it was that pressure that made this trip so intimidating.

Winston nodded in agreement with Mei. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. And we're all behind you, Juno. No matter what."

Juno looked between Winston and Mei, taking comfort in their confidence. Beyond them, Cassidy tipped his hat in her direction, and Sojourn offered a silent

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nod of approval. Even though she was nervous about the meeting, everyone here believed in her.

"You are right," she said with a determined nod. "I made it all the way to Earth. A trip to Lijiang is just another stop on my journey."

Winston's smile broke into a wide grin. "That's the spirit! Echo, have you charted their flight path yet?"

The room buzzed with activity as Winston and Echo returned to his desk and the other agents shifted focus back to their own concerns. Juno watched over it all with her hands clasped together against her chest, dulling the pounding of her heart.

Mei nudged Juno's shoulder and then pulled her in for a quick hug. With a squeeze, she whispered, "You're going to do great, Juno."

As they parted, there was an unspoken *thank you* in Juno's expression.

"Whenever you're ready to go, just let us know."

Though the moment was familiar, Juno knew it would be different this time. When she'd left the colony behind, her mother's voice had been her only guide. And the burden of hope had been Juno's alone. Now, she had Overwatch by her side—she wasn't the only one carrying forward the mission to save her home.

The gardens at Lucheng contained entirely new shades of green.

Juno had grown up around warm colors—from the surface of Mars to every shade of Earth's sunsets in the Western holovids her father loved—but *green* was something special. Lucheng Interstellar had curated an abundance of plant life in their garden: ginkgoes, pothos, and low-lying jasmine framed a view of the city

and the tower, offsetting signs of Null Sector's attack with their natural beauty.

Dr. Shing, the lead scientist on Project Red Promise, had been there to greet them upon arrival. Juno had already observed Dr. Shing's warmth and was feeling more confident about the visit.

"I hope you don't mind taking the scenic route," Shing said with a wave at the surrounding flora. "The tower is under repair after the Null Sector attacks, so we'll be convening in one of the other offices on campus."

"Oh, I do not mind at all!" Juno replied. "The gardens here are so beautiful."

"They are indeed. All thanks to the advanced hydroponic and temperature-control systems we first developed for our lunar colony," Shing recited, as if this was a tour she'd given many times.

Mei and Shing quickly struck up a conversation, discussing what had brought both of them to their respective fields and finding similarities in the nature of their research. Meanwhile, Juno was already drifting ahead, hovering higher than Mei and Shing as she moved to examine a papery blossom on a nearby dove tree. She spun on her heel, letting her overboots take her above the canopy and away from the path. From this height, she could better see the state of the tower after Null Sector's attack. One of the windows had been blown out from the inside, leaving only jagged shards along the edges of the frame, and little black patches, marked by bullet holes and explosive residue, marred the facade. Workers gathered on hovering platforms high off the ground—somewhere close to the sixtieth floor, Juno estimated—and carefully lowered twisted metal segments to the earth, where massive panels of durovidro were being cut to size. Juno slowly floated down toward Mei and Shing, who were in the middle of a conversation when she rejoined them.

"But it's taking significantly longer than we planned. Most of our efforts have been put toward helping Lijiang recover from the invasion," Shing was explaining.

"They're lucky to have your support," Mei said with a smile. "Not every company would put their community first."

"In my experience, Lucheng isn't like other companies. Besides, the reconstruction efforts benefit all of us. We believe it to be vital not just to the success of our work but for the health of our communities to build and maintain secure environments that foster expansive thinking."

There was something about the way Shing said this that left Juno slightly uneasy. The words sounded different than how Shing had spoken to Mei regarding her own study—almost rehearsed—and Shing herself seemed nervous, as if there was some truth she was scared to say aloud.

But before Juno could ask what was wrong, Shing had turned her attention to a card reader just outside the facility door. She ushered them inside and down the hall, and before long they were settled in a quiet conference room, with a panel of scientists opposite Juno and Mei. Seated apart from the others, in a hoverchair at the head of the table, was Dr. Chao.

Shing made brief introductions, naming each of the scientists from the Red Promise team and their specialties, but it was Chao who spoke first.

“Juno Teo Minh,” Chao said as she gestured for Juno to sit. “It’s so good to finally meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine, Dr. Chao!” Juno replied with a bright smile. Mei shook hands with the last of the scientists while Juno surveyed the room and shifted in her seat, impatient for a chance to ask the questions she’d formulated on the flight over.

The meeting began with Juno providing a detailed account of her journey to Earth. It was strange to be under such intense scrutiny, but the scientists were nice enough, and they all seemed impressed by the efficacy of her ship, given the limited resources available for its construction.

When the conversation moved to the state of the Mars colony, however, the panel’s curiosity came into sharper focus. The questions became more specific, as if Lucheng already knew a great deal about the dust storms.

“I am not sure how it compares to what they might be experiencing now,” Juno said in response to a question concerning the magnitude of the last storm she had witnessed. “But I brought back a collection of their latest readings, and Mei has been helping me interpret it.”

The panel all turned their attention to Mei, who had begun to scroll through her findings on a datapad. “Juno is right—it’s not exactly like storm readings or predictions here on Earth, but I’ve found the similarities are close enough that, when running Juno’s data through my existing simulations, I have been able to predict the rate at which the storms are likely to occur today, as well as come up

with some options for how Lucheng could reduce their severity.”

Mei pulled up one of her charts on the large holo-display, and the room grew quiet. There were a few murmurs as the scientists leaned closer to one another and began pointing things out on their own datapads. Except for Shing, none of them looked beyond their own screens to acknowledge Mei’s projections. The thought of having traveled all this way just to have Mei’s work go unappreciated was frustrating, to say the least. Juno was on the verge of speaking up when Shing cut in.

“We appreciate you answering our questions, Juno. I understand this must be difficult to rehash.”

Juno shook her head. “I would not say it is . . . *difficult*, exactly, Dr. Shing. Of course I am frightened about the state of my home and my family, but I know I must not lose hope. And I am very grateful to have Lucheng’s support!”

“Juno’s optimism is one of her best traits,” Mei interjected with a soft smile.

Chao wore her own smile tight across her face, somehow entirely devoid of joy. “Yes, that certainly seems to be the case. But admirable as that may be, you must understand that as an organization dedicated to science, Lucheng must make . . . practical decisions.”

That uneasiness crept back into Juno once again, but she stayed quiet.

“The last report we received on the dust storms painted a dire picture of the colony,” Chao continued. “When we lost communication, we could only assume the worst. And with the rising threats here on Earth, Lucheng could no longer justify allocating resources toward a return to Mars.”

Juno’s stomach dropped. There was a heavy pause between them before she said, “You mean . . . Lucheng has not already been planning a rescue mission?”

There was an uncomfortable silence, punctuated by a reluctant cough from Shing. “Unfortunately, no,” she said, with what seemed to be genuine sympathy. “It would have been an . . . imprudent use of company resources.”

Chao cut in, quick to clarify. “It was a tragedy, Juno. Truly. But the storms scaled at an unprecedented pace. All our attempts to communicate with the base, both before and after your arrival, have failed, and at this stage we’ve been unable to collect any further readings of our own. I’m afraid there have been no signs of life in the time since your return.”

No signs of life.

A few of the scientists traded nervous glances. Dr. Shing leaned in to whisper something to Chao, but Chao lifted a hand in dismissal. Juno barely registered their exchange, focusing instead on that short phrase.

“No signs of life?” Juno blurted out the question before she knew what she would say next. “I am their sign of life, Dr. Chao. And their research has not failed, but they need resources and expertise to stabilize the Martian atmosphere. Mei has that knowledge, simulations to show you, possible ways to—”

Juno felt tears begin to well in the corners of her eyes. She paused to take a breath and refocus. It took effort to hold back her emotions, and when she spoke again, the tightness in her throat was audible. At some point, she had begun to hover slightly above the surface of her chair.

“My family made a promise to Lucheng. A promise we kept: to prove to the world that life on Mars was possible. We did everything Lucheng hoped for and more. It has been mere months since the colony lost contact . . . and you have already given up on us?”

Mei reached out to place a gentle hand on Juno’s arm, guiding her back down to earth.

After a moment, Chao sighed—once again plastering on an expression Juno couldn’t help but distrust. “I don’t expect you to agree with our decision, Juno. If we’d known then what you told us today, I believe we would have made a different choice.”

Chao swiped her palm across the arm of her previously docked hoverchair, and it hummed to life. “Your safe return home is nothing short of a miracle, Juno, but I’m afraid Lucheng cannot operate based on faith. At this time, all our simulations calculate the odds of a successful rescue mission below 3 percent. If you are willing to share the data you have brought back from the colony with Lucheng, we can of course support Dr. Zhou in her research—I imagine her expertise would be broadly applicable to the work we do. But we cannot in good conscience launch a rescue mission in the hope of defying such desperate odds.”

Juno said nothing as she watched the scientists gather their notes on the conversation, sorting a record of her life into various folders. Shing gestured for the rest of the team to go ahead and stood beside Dr. Chao with her hands crossed over a datapad.

“MY FAMILY MADE A PROMISE TO LUCHENG. A PROMISE WE KEPT: TO PROVE TO THE WORLD THAT LIFE ON MARS WAS POSSIBLE. WE DID EVERYTHING LUCHENG HOPED FOR AND MORE. IT HAS BEEN MERE MONTHS SINCE THE COLONY LOST CONTACT . . . AND YOU HAVE ALREADY GIVEN UP ON US?”

Eventually, when it was just the four of them left behind, Juno spoke up again.

“It was not a return,” she said.

Chao furrowed her brow. “Sorry?”

“I did not *return* to Earth,” Juno said again, standing from her chair and puffing out her chest. “I left my home behind.”

Juno caught Mei’s expression from the corner of her eye—some mix of sympathy and sorrow, but perhaps also a bit of pride.

“Of course,” Chao said with an awkward throat clear. “But . . . if we are to work together in any capacity, I must ask that you refrain from revealing further details about Project Red Promise to the public. Your journey to Earth garnered significant press coverage, which has complicated our ability to provide support for the mission. . . . though we appreciate your discretion in the time since.” Chao sniffed. “Project Red Promise was confidential for a reason. It would be detrimental to the progress we have made if the full extent of the project were revealed to the public now, before we have completed our analysis of all available data.”

It shouldn’t have been a surprise at this point that Dr. Chao wanted Juno to keep the colony a secret. Somehow, Juno still found herself disappointed.

“If you can abide these terms, we can commit to reviewing the atmospheric data you and Dr. Zhou have prepared. Consider my offer, Juno. Your parents worked hard to advance humanity’s understanding of extraterrestrial colonization. I can only imagine they would want you to help us do the same.”

Juno said nothing in reply. She kept her eyes fixed on the table, unwilling to acknowledge Dr. Chao’s shallow interpretation of her family’s motivations.

Chao brushed past Shing and began moving to the door, adding, “We’ll keep in touch, Juno. Dr. Shing will show you out.”

And then Chao was gone, taking with her any chance for Juno to ask the rest of her questions.

"This way," Shing said, abruptly breaking the silence. "You should at least see the museum before you go. It's just past the garden." Juno kept her hand clasped in Mei's as the three of them walked back the way they had come. The gardens looked different in the evening—for the first time, Juno noticed the dull silver of machinery encroaching on the greenery. Some creature had dug holes in the dirt by the pond and left a trail of muddy paw prints; a patch of knotweed had cracked the concrete of a maintenance path. The whirring of the hydroponics system drowned out the sounds of the Night Market, and the array of solar lamps obscured the first stars above them.

When they reached the museum, Shing handed them off to a guide, promising to meet them back at the gift shop. Juno would have been entranced by the tour just a few hours earlier, but now it held little interest. The vast collection of satellite imagery, the memorial portraits of the animals from Project: Star Companion, the blueprints of rockets, and the plans for the Horizon Lunar Colony all blurred together. By the time they reached the gift shop, Juno wanted nothing more than to return to Gibraltar.

They found Dr. Shing standing outside the gift shop holding a large model rocket that she must have bought inside. She was eager to show Juno the details: the rocket had a Horizon Lunar Colony logo on the side that doubled as a button that would cause holo-projected stars to appear.

It was well crafted and a thoughtful gift. Shing even pointed out a maintenance panel on the underside that Juno could use to modify the toy and alter the projections. But that's all it was—a *toy*, just another patronizing gesture from Lucheng as they attempted to downplay the gravity of their decisions. After the way Chao had treated Juno, it was cold comfort.

"Thank you," Juno said as Shing handed her the rocket. Her family had taught her it was important, no matter how you felt about a gift, to always say thank you.

"Of course. I thought . . . well, after how things went today, you should have something to take back with you."

Juno looked past Shing toward the door, suddenly desperate to leave Lucheng and all its false promises behind her.

“And I thought it might remind you of home.”

The words caught Juno’s attention—it was the first time anyone here had acknowledged she might miss life on the colony.

“I want you to know, Juno,” Shing began in a low voice, hesitation shadowing her words, “that I’m sorry. Maybe it isn’t worth anything now, but Lucheng Interstellar canceled the Mars recovery project against my recommendation.”

Juno met Shing’s gaze, then, and saw her differently: not just as a scientist but as someone else limited by Lucheng’s decisions. She had been part of Project Red Promise, after all. Perhaps she, too, was grieving the loss of the colony.

“Thank you,” Juno said again, and this time she meant it.

Mei put her hand on Juno’s shoulder, angling them both toward the exit. “Yes, thank you, Dr. Shing.” After a reassuring nod to Juno, she added, “We won’t give up.”

Shing walked with them to the threshold, as if reluctant to let them out of her sight. The door was almost shut behind them when she stopped it and ran into the street after them.

“Dr. Zhou, wait—” Shing said, reaching to grab Mei’s shoulder.

Mei turned, surprised, and looked between Juno and Shing.

“Be careful. Both of you,” Shing warned, the words sounding desperate as they cut through her quickened breath. She cast a nervous glance back at the tower behind her and let go of Mei.

“Lucheng Interstellar isn’t as focused on its people as Dr. Chao might have you believe. Progress always comes first, and often . . . at a cost.”

That night, Juno and Mei had some time left before the dropship was ready to return to Gibraltar. With the outcome of the meeting still weighing heavy on Juno, Mei had suggested they go for a stroll to explore Lijiang’s Night Market.

The pair walked for a long stretch, stopping in shops and collecting souvenirs to bring back to Gibraltar. But as much as Juno appreciated Mei’s attempts to cheer her up, she couldn’t keep Dr. Chao’s callous observation—“no signs of life”—off her mind.

“LUCHENG INTERSTELLAR ISN'T AS FOCUSED ON ITS PEOPLE AS DR. CHAO MIGHT HAVE YOU BELIEVE. PROGRESS ALWAYS COMES FIRST, AND OFTEN . . . AT A COST.”

As if sensing Juno's anxiety—perhaps noticing the hesitation in her steps or the way her shoulders hunched as she shied away from the crowds—Mei eventually guided them to a small restaurant on the outskirts of the market. The meal was a welcome reprieve; the warmth of the dumplings shared in such good company brought Juno a small measure of peace. Together the two surveyed the market crowd as they ate, maintaining an easy silence. Eventually, when the plates were almost empty and the first of the market's stores began to close for the night, Mei spoke up. “You know . . . I'm very proud of you, Juno.”

“Why?” Juno asked, her confidence dulled after the events of the day.

“You did a very brave thing, speaking up for your family with Dr. Chao like that.”

Juno just shrugged and looked back at the last traces of the crowd outside, unconvinced.

“I mean it. I don't know if I would have had the courage to do that if I were in your shoes.”

“Of course you would have,” Juno insisted, but Mei only smiled and shook her head.

After a lingering quiet, Juno glanced back at Mei. “Auntie . . . when you made it back to Overwatch from Antarctica, did you ever feel lonely? Even when there were people all around you, trying to help you find your place?”

“All the time,” Mei replied, her voice soft. “I know it's scary, thinking of all the things that could have happened since you left. And I know Lucheng might not be as much help as we hoped, but we still know more than we did this morning.” Mei kept a bright smile as she looked across the table at Juno. “Even if Lucheng isn't prepared to send a ship to Mars right now, that doesn't mean we won't find a way to save them, or your home.”

“I do not understand. Why do I have to convince them to help?”

Mei sighed. “Sometimes . . . people on Earth don’t do the right thing unless they know it benefits them.”

Juno just listened, shifting bok choy across her plate with her chopsticks.

“I see so much of your mother in you, you know,” Mei continued. “You think I’m brave . . . but she was fearless. And she felt the same way you do, that even if it’s difficult or dangerous, it’s always important to do good. It was her belief—that we could make a difference through our work—that inspired me to join Overwatch in the first place.”

Juno wanted to take comfort in the words, but the way Mei spoke about her mother—as if she was already gone—just filled her with a different dread.

“I know that you and Overwatch are here for me, but . . .” Juno’s eyes were shining when she looked up. “I miss my family, Auntie Mei. And I will not give up on them . . . even if Lucheng already has.”

Mei reached for her hand across the table. Outside, some of the lights lining the market paths began to dim. “We won’t stop trying to save them, Juno. I promise.”

The flight back to Gibraltar was long and bumpy. Juno spent the hours thinking through the events of the day. Chao’s cold refusal and Shing’s warning had cast a shadow on the visit, leaving Juno unsure of whom she could trust.

Just as Juno was drifting off, the ship jolted. The locker where she had stored her things banged open, spilling her bag and its contents onto the floor. Juno held on to the edge of her seat and shut her eyes, waiting for the turbulence to pass.

“Sorry about that, everyone.” Tracer’s voice came over the intercom after a few moments. “Just ran into a rough patch! Should be smooth sailing for the rest of the ride.”

Juno opened her eyes and unclenched her fists, exhaling in relief before unbuckling to clean up her things. The rocket Dr. Shing had given her had been flung to the far corner of the cabin. The holo-projection flickered, the stars shifting in and out of existence as the toy rattled against the metal floor.

Juno picked up the rocket, turning it over in her hands and looking for signs of damage. It seemed mostly intact—she was surprised it was already malfunctioning.

*"I KNOW THAT YOU AND OVERWATCH ARE HERE FOR ME, BUT ..."
JUNO'S EYES WERE SHINING WHEN SHE LOOKED UP.
"I MISS MY FAMILY, AUNTIE MEI. AND I WILL NOT GIVE UP ON THEM ...
EVEN IF LUCHENG ALREADY HAS."*

Juno moved back to her bag, pulling out a basic set of tools she always kept on hand, and carefully unscrewed the maintenance panel. The lid popped off immediately, as if the screws had barely held it on.

Taped to the inside of the panel was a datachip and a carefully folded note. It had detailed instructions—quick modifications to rewire the rocket for audio output and how to install the datachip. At the bottom of the page was a familiar sentiment, scrawled in hasty characters:

WILL CONTACT WHEN I KNOW MORE.

DON'T LOSE HOPE.

—S

For the rest of the trip home, Juno was focused entirely on the rocket. She tucked it into her bag when they landed and went straight to her room, assuring the other agents that she'd be ready for a debrief in the morning. It was only hours later, when the sun was just about to rise over the bay, that Juno finished her work.

Juno sat huddled on the floor between the rocket and a speaker, ready for whatever would play. After a few moments, the holo-projection changed to show a visual of the colony, and Juno heard her mother's voice play over the monitor's speakers.

"My name is Jiayi Teo. I am a scientist stationed at the Mars colony, code-named Project Red Promise. If anyone can hear me, please respond. We are requesting immediate resupply and support from Lucheng Interstellar."

Hearing her mother's voice again was almost enough to bring her to tears. But Juno had heard the message before—it was the same one the colony had been broadcasting months ago, when she left for Earth. She sighed, disappointed, and was about to turn off the recording when she heard something new. *"Juno, if you're hearing this, we're all right."*

“TO WHOEVER IS HEARING THIS TRANSMISSION, YOU MAY HAVE GIVEN UP ON US . . . BUT PLEASE DON’T GIVE UP ON HER.”

There was a pause in the transmission, and her father’s voice echoed in the background, his words unintelligible, before Jiayi continued.

“We want you to know we’re all so proud of you, Juno. No matter what happens, wherever you go, there will be people who love you. And even if we aren’t together, as long as you have memories of us . . . you’ll always be carrying a piece of home.”

Her mother’s tone turned serious then, steadied by the same determination Juno had heard when they said goodbye.

“To whoever is hearing this transmission, you may have given up on us . . . but please don’t give up on her.”

Juno held her breath, as if waiting for her mother’s face to appear, but the projection flickered out and the transmission faded into static. In the quiet of her room, with the rocket held close to her chest, Juno played back the recording again and again, listening for the hope in her mother’s voice.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jude Stacey is a writer and game designer with a love of heroes. After studying literature and writing, she started her career as a poetry editor before transitioning to work in games. Outside of work, they enjoy wrestling, gaming with friends, and curling up on the couch to watch movies with their partner and pets. She is currently living in New England and working as a senior narrative designer on the *Overwatch 2* team.