

## Soldier's Sunset

Juno sits on the shore, watching the dark waves gently lap against the black sand. Overhead, the twin suns shine down on her through cirrus clouds, creating sunbeams as one would read about in the book they call the Bible. Her father, Adam Graves, had an old worn copy for those nights when he couldn't sleep. She had tried to read it once. All the stories of God's benevolence and divinity still fascinate her. Since Juno is the reincarnation of the creator of her previous universe, Wrivin, she herself understands faith on a level unmatched by most. Yet in that moment, beneath the pale light of the dimming suns, she hopes an angel will appear beside her. She turns her head. Unfortunately, all she sees is cold, dark sand.

Nothing. She sighs, hugging her knees.

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Her late husband, Castor, loved beach sunsets such as this just as much as she did. Maybe even more so. With their vivid beginnings and gentle endings, eventually fading into the cold darkness of night, sunsets captivated both of them. She often walked with him along these same shores, occasionally finding a glass bottle washed up on the sand. He always collected them for her and came by in the night to deliver them. She admired his thoughtfulness more than she could express. Castor often invited her to swim with him too. He became so flustered whenever he asked, stumbling over his own words and adding an "only if you want to, though" at the end of his request. He'd always ask her consent in everything. Such a compassionate man he'd been. More of the secret things she admired and never told him...

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Smiling softly to herself, she creeps a bit closer to the water, allowing the waves to brush over her ankles. A lone sand dollar lands by her left hand and she carefully picks it up between

her thumb and forefinger. She turns it over and back, studying the star-shaped pattern on it. Holding the sand dollar closer to her face, she then glances beyond it at the endless horizon stretching out before her. A cool ocean breeze plays with her hair before rushing off into the evening abyss. She has no one to talk to but herself. She closes her eyes. Why is she here?

*Saying goodbye to this place is going to be harder than I thought...*

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Before long, the sound of the waves contorts into explosions and echoing screams. After all this time, her mind has finally unlocked that door she had locked up long ago. She shivers. Where once the fading light of the twin suns had warmed her skin, the cold darkness of space now chills her to the bone. Her throat closes up. She opens her eyes to find that the beach is no longer before her. Instead, a battlefield of bloody soil and strange plants stretches endlessly before her, spotted with craters where extraterrestrial missiles have landed. A singular building breaks the line of the horizon; the lab. Grotesque corpses, dozens of them, lie strewn on the ground; one is her father, another her late husband. Juno immediately covers her mouth and her eyes, trying not to panic. The Madness War ended long ago; why must these memories still haunt her? She's tried so hard to repress them and now she's failed. All the self-imposed thoughts of denial that swarm her skull make her sick.

*I did what I had to do. I saved humanity. I ended the war.*

*And their deaths... were necessary casualties for peace.*

*I have to move on and forget them. Isn't that what perfect soldiers do?*

Her mind still trapped in the horrors of the war, Juno finally forces herself to look at the bodies before her. Adam Graves, her father, found her and cared for her through her retrograde

amnesia. He'd been scared of her at first, but soon came to love her as his daughter. He never forced her into going on a mission for him, no matter how desperate.

Meanwhile, sweet Castor Reese, her beloved boyfriend, then husband, then father to their children... Before she met him, she didn't fully understand human emotion. Yes, with her shapeshifting affinity, she could certainly be quite the actress, playing any role she could ever need or want. Roleplay still comes easy to her. Yet Castor had been the one to show her how deep and genuine emotion is supposed to feel. He had wanted Juno to experience for herself the joys of being human; not out of pity, but a real desire to connect with her. He'd taught her how to express the most valuable emotions of all: compassion, empathy... and love.

Castor helped her to feel love through comfortable vulnerability. She didn't have to repress all her negative emotions. She didn't have to kill for him. All he'd ever wanted was to present her with innocent love. She could be angry. She could be sad. She could be scared. She could openly feel emotions around him and he'd never judge her. Juno had been his everything: a curious, wondrous, and passionate woman he loved more than life itself.

Her husband and her father both gave everything, even their lives, so that she could have a single, impossible chance to end the Madness War. Years were dedicated to that one purpose. And she finally won... but at what cost?

*Why did the war take everyone's lives?*

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"DAMN IT ALL!" she shouts, slamming her fists into the ground beneath her. And when she realizes that she has struck sand and not soil, the scene of the battlefield fades from view, little by little. Not real. Not real. Not *real*. She turns her attention to the sky once again, which

has now deepened into a navy blue, and sighs once more. She loves this place with her whole heart. Yet being here without him... she wishes she's somewhere—anywhere—else.

"I'm sorry, Castor. You asked me not to mourn for you, but..." Juno trails off, tears now spilling down her face as broken sobs escape her lips. She's so lonely. If her father were here, she'd apologize for everything: the secrets, the injuries, and his fate, even though none of this is her fault. Hopefully, he understands just how much she loves him.

And *Castor*— Wrivin, why did he have to die? He had *proposed* to her here. Just a bit longer and they would've been married on this beach too. *Married!* Joined together in love for the rest of their lives! By now, Juno is no longer illuminated by the twin suns, but rather the singular moon. A ghostly light shimmers around her, and the line between sea and sky has dimmed into nothingness. Sitting here alone in the shadows, she supposes now is the time to abandon the beach forever. She stands up slowly and begins to walk along the inky sand, a simple song fragment repeating in her head over and over and over again...

*Honestly, I didn't think about how we didn't say "Goodbye."*

*Just, "See you very soon.'*

*It hurts to be something.*

*It's worse to be nothing with you...*