

## Extract from the story “Jetsam” in *Engines of Desire*

I stand on the balcony outside my parent’s cinder-block apartment, watching contrails drift apart in slate skies. My left hand grips a just-delivered letter, crushes it. I can’t help it, the tracking device that the officer has shot into my hand makes it impossible to uncurl my fingers just yet. It burns.

*By direction of the President...the following personnel are ordered to active duty...on that date, the named will proceed to \_\_\_\_\_ Military Facilities for the retrieval of said personnel out of Jet Oberaan(yr-15)/ovaries-2:*

In the living room, a printout of number and letter combinations sits on the couch: four hundred thousand, one name for each egg follicle inside me, one name for each potential soldier. I’d stopped reading after the fourth page—there are one hundred and nine pages more. By my calculations, and the doctors’ latest report, I’m twenty-six healthy divisions full of death to our enemy. No surprise I’ve been called. I always sort of knew. I just thought I had more time. I have five days.

Inside, Mom still shouts with joy. She’s been waiting for this moment since the day I started my period, when she dragged me to the registration office. She’d said if I got picked, we’d all get rich. A credit for every vat-grown baby forced into adult soldierhood within a year of conception, a credit for every soldier shipped into space, with a bonus if they were modified. Then I’d have a room of my own instead of sleeping on the couch, and Mom could buy us real food. Dad could get a new heart, which they couldn’t afford because all the money from Mom’s factory salary was going to me—for pills to jump-start all the plumbing and for doctor’s fingers poking inside me every six months, from the time I turned five. It was my fault he didn’t have the right pills or the right heart. That’s what Mom said. Of course I signed, the day my period started. I didn’t know any better. I was nine.

My neighbors across the way are staring at me. Faces peer out from a grimy square of glass, barely large enough to see out of. They’re surprised I’m out here—there’s not much of anything to see. Their balconies are the same as ours, the same grey concrete and steel. If I stood on the railing and jumped, I could almost reach them. To my right and left, hundred-story high apartment buildings sit in rows, bits of laundry fluttering from tiny open windows. Eighty stories below, a neon-lined strip of street glows in shadow. I’ve walked for miles and never seen the end of our street, never seen the end of this metal canyon, the beginning of somewhere else. Somewhere up above me, a war is being fought, has been fought for as long as anyone remembers. My made-to-military-specification sons and daughters will cram themselves into ships, soar past the curve of the planet. Will they crowd the windows, stare at the dwindling city before space and time swallow them whole? Will they see the end of my street before I do? Probably.

It’s so quiet out. I pull the oxiclamp from my nose and sniff the air. Metal and fuel.

Building by building, row by row, lights flicker and wink out. Airbase sirens sound through the chilly air. The city sobs. The latest corps are about to launch—little more than one hundred

thousand in all. Rumor has it, something terrible happened with the deep space travel modifications to the last draft. They had to destroy half the crop. And the last two female draftees disappeared—ran away, or killed themselves. That’s why they needed me so soon, I bet. I stare at my hand. Under the brown skin, a dot of garnet winks at me as it burrows deeper. No one’s taking chances this time.

“Jet, get inside.” Mom reaches out from the doorway, plucking at my sleeve. I go in and lock the door behind me, sealing it airtight. Mom bangs the thick steel shutter over the window. Everything has to be protected. The burn-off of battle cruisers floats through the air for days, bright cinders of liquid fire, beautiful and deadly. Sometimes it burns right through the walls. I grab my pack off the couch, fastening it to thick rubber straps at my side. Everything I need to survive is in it: food and ammunition, credits and bullets, tampons and hemlock. For barter, or for use.

“What about the list? Jet, take the list!” Mom struggles with her own pack, trembling hands snapping the locks into place. It’s hard to see anything in the garnet glow of the single emergency light over the door.

“It’s too big, I only need the letter.”

“Put that away, and get the list! It’s military property, we need to bring it with us when you go to the hospital.”

“No, we don’t!” Mom never listens to me. She rips her pack off and opens it, trying to cram all the paper inside. The hall alarms kick in, and we wince. My earplugs are somewhere in my pockets. We have two minutes to get to the inner stairwells.

“Mada, we don’t need the list,” Dad shouts from the bedroom doorway. His pack is crammed with plastic bottles: heart pills, all my vitamins and supplements. I see how his hand presses against his body. I recognize the stance. He’s holding a knife.