



**THE BOY ON
SETI-PRIME**

**HUMANITY SHATTERED
SHORT STORY**

SHAMON HARPER

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CHAPTER I

THE BOY ON SETI-PRIME

WHITE WITHOUT MERCY

Seti-Prime did not have seasons anymore. It had endurance. Before the war, orbital stabilizers ringed the planet in elegant arcs of mirrored steel, regulating jet streams and temperature bands with quiet precision. The world had been marketed as temperate, dependable — a frontier world built for gradual expansion and long-term habitation.

Then the Jeraldi fleet fractured orbital control during their “stabilization intervention.” The United Solar Systems Cooperative considered the move an act of insurgency aimed at destabilizing the planet’s governing body. Some of the stabilizer rings were shredded by counterfire. Others were sabotaged when Coalition forces attempted to retake the grid. A few fell from the sky in burning spirals, breaking apart against the upper atmosphere before their debris rained down across cities already under siege.

The climate did not collapse all at once; it unraveled. Wind currents lost structure. Temperature gradients swung violently. Snow began falling in regions that had never seen it. Heat systems failed in cascading patterns as infrastructure strained the new extremes. Winter did not arrive; it remained.

Buildings froze from the inside out. Water pipes crystallized and burst, filling corridors with spears of ice. Entire residential blocks became sealed tombs when heating grids failed mid-night. Streets filled with snow that never softened — angular, compacted drifts that cut exposed skin like powdered glass.

The war did not stop because of it. It simply adapted. Convoys insulated their armor. Infantry units layered heating coils into combat suits. Drone optics recalibrated for thermal distortion. Civilians figured out how to exist, too, at least the ones who survived did.

In the southern ruins of Havelon City, beneath sagging mag-rail lines that drooped like broken ribs against the sky, a fifteen-year-old boy learned how not to shiver. He was a dusty-brown-haired kid who, much taller than

most other kids his age, not that there were any. His name was Johnathan, which was what his mother had called him. No one else did. He lived in the spaces between structures under collapsed transit platforms, where concrete slabs formed angled caverns shielded from direct wind, and inside maintenance shafts, where insulation foam still clung to corroded piping. He also stayed beneath overturned freight containers, where snow was packed tightly along one side, creating a crude thermal barrier. He rotated locations every three nights. Staying more than three nights never worked out. Patterns were vulnerabilities.

He moved primarily after dusk, when patrols grew predictable, and drones cycled to lower-altitude scanning. He memorized routes by feel rather than sight — counting steps between debris fields, measuring turns by the slope of wind across his face. Landmarks changed too often. Buildings that stood in the morning might be collapsed by artillery in the afternoon. Whole intersections vanished beneath drifting white in a matter of hours.

He carried little. A pry bar fashioned from a snapped support rod. A dull combat knife taken from a dead militia runner. A coil of insulated wire. A salvaged battery cell he rationed like breath. He did not beg. He did not barter. He scavenged, and he survived.

Johnathan did not experience fear the way others did. He

remembered feeling it once. The day the tower fell. It had not been their building. It had been across the street — a mid-rise administrative block struck during a counterbattery exchange. The impact was miscalculated. The structure collapsed outward instead of inward. The pressure wave shattered every window in their apartment. Glass turned to horizontal rain. His mother had been in the hallway. She did not scream. She moved. She reached him in two strides and threw herself across his body as the ceiling buckled. Concrete dust filled the air.

The sound was not an explosion. It was a deep, concussive compression — like the sky inhaling too fast. When he crawled free hours later, the apartment wall was gone. The city beyond had been reduced to skeletal outlines and drifting snow. His mother lay partially buried beneath insulation foam and plaster shards.

Her eyes were open. Snow fell through the exposed ceiling and settled gently along her shoulders. He tried to shake her awake. She did not move. He waited beside her for nearly an hour, not crying or screaming. Waiting. Eventually, the cold began to creep through his clothes.

He stood. He understood something in that moment with perfect clarity: No one was coming. The war did not pause for

apartment blocks. The cold did not spare the grieving. He left her there. The snow buried her before anyone else did. The fear burned out that day. What replaced it was not bravery. It was subtraction. Panic did not prevent impact. Tears did not restore heat. Emotion did not alter the outcome. From then on, he calculated.

He learned patrol rotations by observing from shadowed vantage points. Jeraldi backed militia armored columns favored western corridors near supply depots. Coalition Peace Keepers rotated southern blocks every six hours with mechanical precision. He mapped drone flight arcs by watching the faint glint of rotors against overcast skies. He noted the delay between equipment drop announcements and civilian swarm patterns. He memorized which buildings retained residual heat from geothermal piping and which became ice traps after sunset.

He avoided uniforms, all uniforms. Those meant systems, and systems consumed small things. He had seen Peace Keepers detain unregistered juveniles for “processing.” He had witnessed Jeraldi militia conscript boys barely older than himself, handing them rifles and calling it duty. Both sides used different language. Both sides produced the same

outcome. Small things disappeared.

There had been other street kids. Not many lasted. Some tried forming groups. Groups drew attention, and attention meant armed men. Some begged near supply drop sites. They were beaten away or worse. One boy named Rell had tried following a Jeraldi patrol for scraps. He never returned.

Johnathan did not attach. Attachment meant risk. He tested that once. A half-starved dog with frostbitten ears began trailing him after a ration drop skirmish. It kept a distance at first, watching him from behind snow-packed vehicles. On the fourth day, it came closer. He had cracked open a sealed nutrient pack beneath a collapsed vending kiosk. The smell drew it in. It sat five feet away. Ribs sharp under patchy fur, waiting, and evaluated.

Sharing reduced caloric intake by a measurable percentage. Reducing calories cuts down the survival window. He broke off a small piece anyway. Not from compassion, but from curiosity. The dog took it gently. Its tail gave one tentative thump against the snow. He watched the movement. Johnathan felt nothing.

The next day, he found the dog's carcass near an alley mouth, partially butchered. Another scavenger had needed the meat more. He stepped around the remains and continued his

route. He did not think about it again.

The first time artillery landed close enough to knock him flat, he did not scream. He rolled behind a broken mag-rail pillar, covered his head, and waited for the concussive echo to fade. Debris rained down in frozen chunks. When the dust cleared, a section of the residential block had sheared away. He rose. He did not rush toward the rubble. He did not run away. He assessed which direction the infantry would sweep from. Then he moved opposite.

By fifteen, his body had hardened into lean functionality. Movements were economical. Steps were placed carefully to avoid unstable drifts. Breathing was regulated even when sprinting across open intersections. He did not flinch at gunfire, nor did he startle at sudden movement. He did not pray. Prayer implied expectation. Expectation implied disappointment. He had eliminated both.

CHAPTER II

Matias Jackson still believed systems could save people. It wasn't naïveté, not exactly. It was an inheritance — a worldview built from order and schedules and the quiet confidence of a world that hadn't been forced to improvise its own morality.

He'd grown up on a core-adjacent station that smelled like disinfectant and recycled air. His father supervised freight docks. His mother managed logistics manifests for colonial shipments. Their life had been measured in shifts and quotas and meal blocks. When something went wrong, you filed a report. When something broke, you repaired it. When someone got hurt, help arrived in a uniform and did the right thing because doing the right thing was the job.

Jackson enlisted because he believed in that. He didn't say it out loud at the recruitment center — nobody did. People came in with different masks: pride, boredom, family tradition. But Jackson knew what he was reaching for. Structure, a set of rules strong enough to hold the world still.

ARRIVAL

Seti-Prime did not greet them with ceremony. The drop shuttle pierced the atmosphere in a hard, vibrating plunge that rattled teeth and made even veterans swallow. The viewport showed nothing but cloud — dense, slate-colored bands stitched with thin lightning. Then the cloud broke, and the planet appeared below like a cracked bone, white, jagged, and scarred. The city grid of Havelon was visible only in fragments: blocks of dark metal and concrete protruding through snow drifts like drowned ruins.

Someone behind him said, "Jesus."

Jackson didn't respond. He kept his hands flat on his knees and forced his breathing even. Fear was contagious in confined spaces. He didn't want it in his lungs before his boots hit ground.

Across from him, Chief Lorrin sat with his helmet resting on his thigh.

He didn't look at the viewport. He didn't need to. The other six in Bravo-12 shifted in their harnesses with small, practiced movements, people who had already learned not to waste energy on anticipation.

Jackson was not new to Seti-Prime. This was his third deployment in four years to the icy rock that had been wracked by civil war. PO3 Jackson was the newest member of Bravo-12, but he wasn't exactly wet behind the ears. He felt the anxiety of another deployment to this shit hole of a planet.

His suit was freshly issued. His rifle still had the faint oily tang of factory clean. Even his gloves hadn't fully softened at the joints. He told himself that didn't matter. What mattered was discipline.

The shuttle bucked as it hit turbulence.

A status line lit across the cabin display:

ATMOSPHERIC SHEAR: HIGH

THERMAL DISTORTION: MODERATE SURFACE

TEMP: -31C LOCAL WIND: 40-60 KPH

Jackson watched the numbers and tried to translate them into something his body could understand.

-31C meant exposed skin froze fast. 60 KPH wind meant frost cut through seams. Thermal distortion meant the enemy might hide in the noise.

Stabilization, the briefing had said. This looked like a planet trying to spit them out.

THE BRIEF

Sector Command was housed inside a retrofitted municipal complex. The original structure had been designed for civic services — permits, housing assignments, transit control. Now it was layered with temporary blast shielding and external comm arrays. Inside smelled like polymer heat mats, sweat, and burnt coffee.

A lieutenant stood before a holo-map of southern Havelon.

“Welcome to Sector D,” he said in a tone that implied they should be grateful. “This is not an active war zone; it’s a peace stabilization action.”

That made Jackson smirk a bit. Stabilization action was just another way of saying "war zone". Bullets seemed to fly in all directions, no matter what they called it. Jackson watched a red pulse on the map expand and contract over an entire district.

“What you are seeing is localized hostile activity,” the lieutenant said. “Jeraldi-backed militia cells and independent insurgents. The Coalition’s objective is to stabilize infrastructure corridors, protect civilian movement, and prevent escalation.”

Protect civilian movement. Jackson felt something settle

into place in his mind. That was a job. That was a mission he could hold.

The lieutenant tapped the holo. “Rules of engagement remain in effect. ID before engagement. Non-combatants are not targets. Any juveniles encountered are to be detained for processing and relocation. We are not equipped to house them.”

One of the veterans in Bravo-12 didn’t even blink. Jackson did. Detained and relocated, what did that mean? He didn’t know why the words sounded wrong. Maybe because the lieutenant said them like inventory. He forced his face still. Systems saved people, he reminded himself. Even if the language was ugly, the intent was protection. It had to be.

FIRST PATROL

Bravo-12’s first patrol route cut through a corridor where the city still had bones: the skeletal frames of towers, the hard geometry of old transit lines, the remnants of signage half-buried in white.

Jackson’s visor displayed constant data.

Wind speed. Thermal overlay. Drone net pings. Comms status.

He tried to absorb all of it while also taking in the

rooftops, windows, alleys, and doorways. The city made sound even when it was empty.

Wind moaned through hollowed-out floors. Metal shifted with temperature change, making buildings groan like living things. Somewhere deep beneath the snow, an old power conduit hummed weakly and then fell silent.

Chief Lorrin moved with a veteran's economy — minimal head movement, minimal wasted steps. The others matched his pace. Jackson kept formation and tried not to stare.

Then he saw the first frozen civilian. The body was upright against a wall. Not posed or staged, just... caught. A man in a thin civilian jacket, one arm raised as if he'd been reaching for something when the cold took him. Frost coated his eyelashes. Snow crusted in the folds of his clothing.

Jackson slowed without meaning to. The sight did something to him — not horror, exactly, but disorientation. Like his mind kept trying to correct the image into something more familiar: a person asleep, a statue, a mannequin. A medic team had marked the wall with a small symbol: a simple paint stroke meaning *unrecoverable*.

Lorrin didn't look at the body. He didn't need to. Jackson forced himself to keep moving. He told himself the body was an artifact of failure before the Peace Keepers

arrived. This was why they were here. To make it stop.

THE ALLEY

Later, as they swept through the southern corridor, Jackson's thermal overlay flickered. A small heat signature. It darted between two collapsed transit husks, too fast to be debris settling, too small to be militia.

Jackson paused. "Movement," he said low and quiet over squad comms.

"Where?" Lorrin's voice came back flat.

"North side. Alley," Jackson said.

Chief Lorrin didn't stop. "Scan."

Jackson swept thermal again. Heat signature — faint, intermittent. Not a proper suit. Not a weapon system. A scavenger. But there was something different in the movement. It wasn't panic. It wasn't random sprinting. It was deliberate.

He shifted his angle, trying to catch a visual through the drifting snow. Then he saw him. A boy. Thin, wrapped in layered scraps, moving with the low, efficient gait of someone who had learned to minimize noise. He paused at the alley mouth for half a second.

Their eyes met through Jackson's visor. Jackson expected fear. Most civilians looked at the Peace Keepers with

fear. Either fear of authority or fear of disappointment. The boy's gaze wasn't pleading. It wasn't startled. It wasn't even angry. It was assessing. As if the boy were weighing Jackson's, measuring threat probability, calculating distance and escape vectors.

Then he vanished back into shadow. Jackson's pulse jumped. Not because he'd been threatened, because he'd been seen, and not as a savior. As a variable. Jackson caught himself staring a fraction too long.

Lorrin glanced back. "You see something?"

"A scavenger," Jackson said.

Lorrin exhaled. "Log it."

Jackson did, but his hands felt colder inside his gloves.

THE ORDER

That night, the directive came down. It hit their squad feed in clean, bureaucratic language:

**ALL UNREGISTERED JUVENILES IN SECTOR D
ARE TO BE DETAINED FOR PROCESSING AND
RELOCATION.**

Jackson read it twice. He stared at the words *processing* and *relocation* until they stopped looking like language and began to look like what they meant. He'd seen transport crates at Sector Command — sealed units labeled for "civilian

redistribution.” He’d assumed they were for adults, for displaced families.

He remembered the boy’s eyes. He went to Lorrin’s office. “Chief,” Jackson said, “where are juveniles being relocated to?”

Lorrin didn’t look up from his console. “Off-world.”

“Where off-world?” Jackson asked.

Lorrin’s jaw shifted. The closest thing he gave to emotion. “Not our concern.”

“With respect,” Jackson said, “it is our concern if we’re the ones detaining them.”

Lorrin finally looked up. His gaze was hard, not cruel, but worn. “You’re new,” Lorrin said. “So I’ll tell you this once. We don’t fix Seti-Prime. We contain it. We keep routes open, prevent escalations, and reduce casualties. That’s the mission. Everything else is above our pay grade.”

Jackson held his gaze. “And the kids?”

Lorrin stared at him for a long moment. Then he said, “If you find one, make sure you don’t.”

Jackson didn’t respond. The sentence landed like a crack in the system. Not a rule. Not doctrine. A veteran’s workaround. Jackson left the office with the uncomfortable realization that the mission brief hadn’t lied. It had simply omitted the parts that didn’t fit in clean language.

THE SECOND SIGHT

Two days later, during another patrol, Jackson saw the boy again. Same sector. Same broken transit line. Different alley. The boy was watching from behind a half-collapsed service kiosk, only his eyes visible through the blown-out panel.

Jackson slowed. He wasn't sure why he did it. Curiosity, or perhaps something more dangerous: the need to prove to himself that he could be seen and still choose what he was. He shifted, angling his body so his rifle wasn't pointed directly at the kiosk. He raised his free hand just enough to show it wasn't reaching for a weapon. A subtle signal. The boy didn't move or respond; he just watched.

Jackson spoke quietly, not over comms. "Hey." The word vanished into the wind. The boy's eyes narrowed. Then he slipped away, soundless, vanishing into the white maze.

Jackson stood there a moment longer than he should have.

Lorin's voice snapped in his ear, "PO3. Move."

Jackson moved. But the boy stayed in his mind. Not as a civilian. Not as a target. As a question.

IDEOLOGICAL FRACTURE

That night, Jackson wrote in his private log — not the official report system, but a personal file he kept as a habit from training. He didn't write about tactics. He wrote one sentence:

I don't think this place cares what we call ourselves.

Then he stared at it, unsure whether the sentence was disloyal or simply true. He remembered the briefing: stabilization, containment, protection. He remembered the frozen civilian upright against the wall. He remembered the boy's eyes. And he realized something he didn't want to realize:

The system could be good, and still devour people. The system could mean well, and still produce graves. Jackson lay on his cot and listened to the wind hammer the building. He tried to convince himself that discipline mattered. Those rules mattered. That uniform presence changed outcomes. He still believed it, but not with the same uncomplicated certainty.

The planet was teaching him a different kind of truth: Sometimes the only thing that kept you, human wasn't the system. It was the choices you made inside it.

CHAPTER III

THE STORM

The storm began as subtraction. Sound went first, not silence, but thinning. The constant low hum of distant artillery and city groan softened, as if the atmosphere itself were inhaling and holding. Johnathan noticed. He was crouched inside the skeletal remains of a pharmacy storefront, prying loose a sealed ration cylinder from beneath a collapsed refrigeration unit. The pry bar slipped once against ice-coated metal. He adjusted his grip and tried again.

Then the pressure shifted. A subtle squeeze in the ears. He paused and counted; Five seconds, ten. He stood and stepped toward the blown-out window frame. The sky had flattened. The usual layered gray was gone. In its place: a uniform, suffocating white. Wind did not howl. Not yet, but it was gathering. Johnathan evaluated.

Distance to current shelter: three kilometers. Alternate shelter: maintenance tunnel 1.2 kilometers east. Estimated onset: under two minutes.

He abandoned the ration cylinder. Survival meant mobility. He slipped into the street and moved at a low sprint, boots biting into packed snow with practiced economy. He avoided open intersections, cutting through collapsed lobby entrances and narrow service corridors where the wind would hit later.

Above him, a drone whined in the distance — then banked hard and accelerated away. Even machines retreated.

Across Sector D, Bravo-12 was mid-sweep along the southern mag-rail corridor when the first atmospheric warning pinged across their HUDs.

PRESSURE DROP DETECTED. WIND SHEAR PROJECTION:

SEVERE.STORM CELL ETA: 90 SECONDS.

“Command to all units: priority withdrawal. Repeat, priority withdrawal,” crackled through squad comms.

Chief Lorrin didn’t curse. He pivoted, “Form up. We move.”

They fell into staggered retreat formation automatically. Jackson felt the shift in the air a second before the wind hit. The city’s geometry changed — edges blurring, depth flattening. He glanced at the sky.

“Storm’s early,” one of the veterans said.

“Shut up and move,” Lorrin said.

The first gust slammed into them like a physical shove. Snow lifted off rooftops in horizontal sheets. Debris skittered across the street like thrown gravel. Visibility dropped from clear to thirty meters in less than ten seconds.

Johnathan was halfway across an open loading yard when the wall of white arrived. It did not build gradually. It struck. Wind hit at full force, spinning snow into solid ribbons that cut exposed skin. He staggered, lost footing, and recovered.

The world vanished. Buildings disappeared beyond a

meter of distance. His mental map fractured. He turned what he believed was east. He wasn't certain. The wind screamed now — not howling but shrieking, a high, metallic pitch as it forced its way through broken structures.

He ran; two steps, three. His boot plunged into a drift deeper than expected, and he pitched forward into the snow. Cold hit his face like a slap. He pushed up immediately. He scanned for orientation markers and saw none. The city was gone.

“Maintain spacing!” Lorrin shouted over squad comms, though the wind nearly swallowed his voice.

Jackson kept one gloved hand on the shoulder of the soldier ahead of him, forming a physical chain. Thermal overlay flickered uselessly — atmospheric distortion scrambling resolution.

“Heat signatures dropping across sector,” one of the squad said. “We’re blind.”

They reached the outer perimeter of Sector Command’s reinforced zone — still two blocks away. Another gust nearly knocked Jackson back. Through the white noise, something

flickered on his thermal, small and faint. Inside a structure half-collapsed to the right. He blinked and recalibrated. The signature pulsed once. Then dimmed. “Chief,” Jackson said. “Possible contact inside structure.”

“Negative engagement,” Lorrin said. “Storm is the priority.”

“It’s small,” Jackson said.

“PO3,” Lorrin said with a warning in his tone.

Jackson swallowed wind and snow. He looked again.

The signature was weaker now. It was a single person curled up, stationary, but still alive. Jackson knew it was the boy he had seen recently.

“That’s not our mission,” Lorrin said.

The words echoed the lieutenant’s voice from the briefing room.

Contain.Stabilize.Withdraw.

Jackson hesitated, and in that hesitation, something inside him tipped. The boy’s eyes in the alley. The relocation directive. The frozen civilian upright against the wall. He broke formation.

“PO3!” Lorrin shouted.

Jackson was already moving.



Johnathan reached what he thought was a warehouse entrance and shoved against a steel door crusted in ice. It gave half an inch. Then stuck. He wedged his pry bar into the seam and leaned his weight against it. The wind shifted, hitting him full in the back. The door buckled inward. He stumbled inside. Relief lasted half a second. The roof was gone. The structure was a skeleton — wind funneled straight through the open frame, snow pouring down in sheets.

It was barely better than open street, but it would have to do. He stumbled toward the largest solid object and crouched behind it, curling inward. Johnathan's breathing shallowed, his heart rate slowed, and his fingers didn't respond fully when he flexed them.

He was stiff and felt like he couldn't move. He knew he was risking frostbite. His core temperature was dropping. He had almost no energy. *I am going to die here*, he thought. For the first time in a while, he thought about his mother. He leaned his back against the metal and closed his eyes. It wasn't surrender, it just was. So be it.



Jackson hit the warehouse door at a near run and almost bounced off it when the wind slammed him sideways. He grabbed the handle and pulled. It didn't move. He shifted his weight and forced it inward. The interior was chaos — snow spiraling through skeletal beams, debris rattling across concrete. Thermal overlay flickered, then stabilized. There, behind a small conveyor housing. He moved fast. Dropped to one knee. The boy's face was pale under grime. Frost clung to his eyelashes. His lips were tinted blue.

His eyes opened halfway. Recognition. Not fear. "...don't send me back," he said in a whisper. The words were barely audible over the wind.

Back where? Jackson didn't ask.

He stripped his outer thermal lining in one motion and wrapped it around the boy's torso, sealing as much as he could against exposed skin. The boy didn't resist. Didn't plead. Didn't cling. He watched. As if evaluating whether this variable altered the equation.

"I've got you," Jackson said — unsure whether he was trying to reassure the boy or himself. He lifted him. The boy was lighter than expected, too light. Wind slammed into them

as soon as Jackson turned toward the door. He staggered, nearly losing his footing.

“Bravo-12, this is PO3 Jackson,” he shouted into comms. “I have one civilian. Returning.”

Silence.

Then Lorrin’s voice was tight with something Jackson had never heard before. “Move.”

The storm did not care about heroics. It tried to take them both. Wind shoved them sideways. Snow filled Jackson’s visor, forcing him to blink repeatedly to clear it. His grip slipped once on the boy’s coat, and he tightened his hold. The boy hung listlessly in Jackson’s fireman carry.

“Stay with me,” Jackson said. He couldn’t tell if the boy heard him. He couldn’t tell if he cared. Halfway back to formation, a gust stronger than the rest hit them broadside.

Jackson went down to one knee. The boy slid partially from his shoulder. Cold flooded through the gap in his thermal layer. Jackson swore and hauled him back up, adjusting his grip. His muscles screamed from the awkward weight and wind resistance. He thought, fleetingly: *This is stupid*. Then he remembered the relocation directive. The frozen man against

the wall. The system that consumed small things. He stood and kept moving.

Johnathan drifted in and out of consciousness. He registered heat against his chest. Motion. The violent shove of wind. He calculated, dimly: Was survival a possibility? He did not feel gratitude. He did not feel relief. He noted a change in trajectory and let himself conserve.

Bravo-12 reformed around Jackson as he staggered back into partial visibility range. Lorrin grabbed the boy's arm and helped stabilize the load. "Sector Command is two blocks," he shouted. "Keep moving."

They formed a protective wedge around them and pushed through the white. When the reinforced perimeter doors finally sealed behind them, cutting off the wind, the sudden absence of noise felt like an impact.

Medics rushed forward. They pried the boy from Jackson's arms and laid him onto a heated cot. Jackson stepped back, chest heaving. His thermal layer was gone. Cold had crept deep into his joints. He barely noticed.

A medic pressed a scanner to the boy's neck. "He's hypothermic but viable," she said. "Another ten minutes out there—" She didn't finish.

Jackson looked at the boy's face. Still pale. Still distant.

Not crying. Not grateful. Just alive.

Chief Lorrin approached. “You disobeyed a direct order,” he said.

“Yes, Chief.”

Lorrin studied him for a long moment. Then he looked at the boy. “Get him warm,” he said. And walked away.

CHAPTER IV

WARMTH

Johnathan woke to geometry: straight lines, measured light, and symmetry. The room was metal-paneled, with clean, reinforced seams. Heat flowed from grates along the floor, regulated and steady. The air smelled filtered, recycled, and sterilized.

To Jonathan, it felt suspicious. He did not sit up immediately. He cataloged first. Two armed guards at the door. One medic near a console. One soldier was seated against the far wall with his helmet off. The same one from the storm. Johnathan remained still and deliberately slowed his breathing, pretending unconsciousness for six more seconds, just listening.

He sensed no immediate threat. No raised voices. No mention of relocation. He opened his eyes. The soldier noticed instantly.

“You’re safe,” he said.

Johnathan studied his face. Fatigue lines at the edges of his eyes. Frostbite redness across the bridge of his nose. The thermal lining he’d used was gone; he wore standard-issue armor again. Safe, the word meant nothing without definition.

“Am I detained?” Johnathan asked.

The guards shifted. The soldier hesitated. The pause mattered more than the answer.

“No,” The soldier said.

Johnathan watched his eyes. He believed that, which made it more dangerous. A medic approached with a sealed ration pack and a thermal cup. “Slow,” she said. “You were hypothermic. Your body’s going to feel wrong for a while.” She handed the pack to the soldier rather than to Johnathan directly.

Johnathan noticed. Authority flowed through uniforms. The soldier stepped forward and crouched, holding out the ration. “You need to eat,” he said.

Johnathan took it. He didn't thank him. He opened it methodically, sniffed the contents, then took a measured bite. Calories! The soldier watched him eat.

"Name?" he asked gently.

Johnathan chewed, swallowed. "Johnathan."

"Just Johnathan?" the soldier asked.

"Yes," said Johnathan.

The soldier nodded. "I'm Jackson," he said as he pointed to the name patch on his uniform on the right side of his chest.

Johnathan filed it away. Names were leverage.

THE HESITATION

When the medic left and the guards rotated shifts, the room quieted. Jackson remained seated. Not hovering or looming, but just watching.

"Why didn't you let it take you?" Jackson asked after a while.

Johnathan tilted his head. "Let what?"

"The storm," Jackson said.

Johnathan considered the phrasing. "I didn't see much of a point in resisting it."

"You didn't try to run," Jackson said.

"I ran until I felt I was out of options," Johnathan said.

Jackson frowned. "Hmm," he said with a shrug.

"I couldn't reach my shelter. I was spent. I was hoping to just ride it out," Johnathan said.

Jackson studied him. “You weren’t scared?”

Johnathan thought about the question as if examining a tool he hadn’t used before. “I was cold.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Jackson said.

“I don’t understand?” Johnathan said. “I didn’t want to die if that’s what you mean, but I was getting around to accepting it. If you haven’t noticed, there is a lot of that ground around here these days.”

Jackson felt something tighten in his chest... *This was a tough kid*, he thought. He knew a lot of soldiers who wouldn’t have the same spunk as this kid.

THE FIRST TEST

Two hours later, when the warming cycle was complete and medics cleared him for light movement, Johnathan stood without asking permission. The guards stiffened. Jackson stood too.

“You should rest,” he said.

Johnathan walked toward the door. A guard blocked it.

“Hold up,” Jackson said.

Johnathan looked at him without hostility. “Thought I wasn’t detained,” he said, sounding colder than the wind outside.

The guard glanced toward Jackson, who hesitated, just

for a second. “Let him through,” he said.

The guard looked uncertain but stepped aside. Johnathan stepped into the corridor. Heat diffused outward from central ducts. Lights hummed overhead. Boots echoed on reinforced flooring. He walked, not quickly, but almost mapping. Counting steps between turns and marking exits.

Jackson followed at a measured distance. “You’re free to leave,” he said. “But, it’s bad out there.”

Johnathan didn’t turn. “It is always bad out there.”

“You don’t have shelter?” Jackson asked.

“I did,” Johnathan said.

Jackson absorbed that. “You have somewhere you can go?”

“Yes,” Johnathan said, it was not a lie. He had locations, temporary ones at least.

Jackson nodded. “If you walk out that door,” he said, gesturing toward the outer breezeway, “you’re back in Sector D.”

Johnathan paused there. He studied the heavy blast doors. The snow piled outside the reinforced glass panel. The wind was still tearing across the outer barricades. Then he turned.

“Why did you come back?” he asked.

Jackson didn’t answer. He considered. He could have said so because it was the right thing. He could have said that

because he disobeyed orders. Instead, he said, the only thing that felt true.

“Because you were there,” Jackson said.

Johnathan examined that. “That does not make sense.

People die here all the time.”

“Maybe,” Jackson said.

Silence stretched between them. Johnathan turned back toward the exit. He placed his hand against the metal frame. Cold bled through the seam. He calculated the distance to his previous shelter. He looked at the storm outside the glass panel. A thought came to him: the soldier had disobeyed his command. Nobody had done anything for him since his mother had died. He stepped back from the door. And walked back down the corridor.

Jackson exhaled quietly. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding his breath.

THE CONVERSATION

That night, Johnathan sat cross-legged on a maintenance crate in a side bay, watching Jackson clean his rifle. The ritual was methodical. It was almost hypnotic, disassembling, inspecting, wiping carbon, and eventually reassembling. Johnathan studied each movement.

“You trust this system?” he asked suddenly.

Jackson glanced up. “What do you mean?”

“You wear its emblem,” Johnathan said.

Jackson looked down at the Coalition patch on his sleeve. “I believe in what it’s supposed to be.”

“That is not the same as what it is,” Johnathan said.

Jackson let out a small breath of air that might have been

a laugh. “No. It’s not.”

“Then why stay?” Johnathan asked.

Jackson considered the question longer than he expected

to. “Because if people who care leave, it gets worse.”

Johnathan absorbed that. “Caring doesn’t change

artillery barrages on innocent people.”

“No,” Jackson said. “But it alters choices.”

Johnathan studied him. “You chose incorrectly today.”

Jackson looked up sharply, “How?”

“You disobeyed your superior officer,” Johnathan said.

“And?” Jackson asked.

“You risked getting in trouble for what? A kid, one of many who will probably die on the streets anyway,” Johnathan said.

Jackson held his gaze. “You’re not a calculation, you’re a fucking human.”

Johnathan did not respond. He looked down at Jackson’s

rifle. “How many have you killed?” he asked.

Jackson didn’t flinch at the bluntness, “Enough.”

“Do you feel them?” Johnathan asked.

The question hung. Jackson didn't look away.

“Sometimes.”

“What does that feel like?” Johnson asked.

“Like weight,” Jackson said.

Johnathan frowned. “That doesn't make sense.”

Jackson nodded slowly, “I know.”

The acknowledgement was gentle, not accusatory. That unsettled Johnathan more than anger would have.

THE SHIFT

Over the next few days, Johnathan remained. He did not socialize. He did not ask questions about relocation. He repaired a malfunctioning heating conduit without being told. He identified two blind spots in perimeter camera placement. He corrected a wiring error in a drone recharge rack. He moved through the outpost like someone measuring structural integrity, and mostly he watched Jackson.

He watched how Jackson spoke to civilians. How he corrected younger soldiers without humiliating them. How he hesitated before certain orders.

Johnathan did not attach easily, but he recognized consistency. Jackson's behavior was internally aligned. He said one thing. He did another, but both pointed in the same direction. Protection, even when it wasn't convenient to him.

That was new to Johnathan and worth observing.

Other members of Bravo-12 started to refer to Johnathan as the team mascot. Jonathan didn't know what that meant. He didn't much care. He had found a level of acceptance among others, and that was new to him.

THE FIRST CRACK

On the fourth night, an artillery exchange rattled the sector again. The outpost lights flickered. A shockwave rolled through concrete and steel. Johnathan stood perfectly still in the middle of the bay, breathing steadily, heart rate unchanged, and Jackson noticed. Most civilians flinched. Most soldiers tensed. Johnathan didn't.

“You don't react,” Jackson said.

“What good does that do? It doesn't stop the impacts,” Johnathan said. For the first time, he did not look past Jackson. He looked at him.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST FIRE

The outpost never truly slept. It dimmed, and the lights shifted to low-spectrum night cycle. External flood arrays were powered down to conserve energy. Patrol rotations thinned to essential coverage. But the hum remained, power relays cycling through load redistribution. Drone charging racks clicked softly as units synced. Wind pressing against reinforced outer plating in long, hollow breaths.

Johnathan learned the rhythm quickly. He mapped the structure in his head within forty-eight hours — corridors, choke points, camera arcs, supply lockers, maintenance hatches. He did not ask for permission to move; he simply moved. Jackson watched him from a distance.

“You going to make him sign paperwork?” one of the staff chiefs said one evening.

“He’s not processed,” Jackson said.

“He’s not acting like much of a civilian anymore either,” The implication lingered, asset or liability.

Jackson said nothing.

THE HIT

The first mortar struck at 02:17. It wasn’t a direct impact; it was a proximity strike. The ground shuddered like something enormous had kicked the foundation. Ceiling panels rattled. Dust sifted down from ventilation seams. Alarms snapped alive in overlapping tones.

**INCOMING ARTILLERY DETECTED.GRID LOAD INCREASE.
PERIMETER BREACH POSSIBLE.**

Jackson was already moving before the second impact landed.

“Positions!” Chief Lorrin shouted over internal comms.

Johnathan stood in the middle of the main corridor when the second blast hit. He didn't flinch. He pivoted instead. Not toward shelter. Toward the sound.

The third mortar landed closer. This time, the shockwave hit the structure at an angle, rippling through the interior conduits. Lights flickered. Then went dark for half a second. That half-second mattered. Every soldier in the corridor instinctively looked up.

Johnathan looked at the power relay junction embedded in the wall. A red indicator blinked. Then two. Then the entire relay panel flashed amber. Jackson saw it at the same time.

“Grid overload,” someone shouted.

The perimeter was drawing too much power to compensate for the impacts. If it failed, the outer blast plating wouldn't hold against sustained fire.

Jackson ran toward the control bay. He was three steps too slow. The conduit exploded. Not in flame, but in light. A burst of white-hot arc flashed from the junction and slammed into the opposite wall. Sparks sprayed across the corridor like thrown needles. The grid flickered violently.

External gunfire erupted almost immediately — Jeraldi's small arms started taking advantage of the instability.

“Manual reroute!” Lorrin shouted from somewhere beyond the smoke.

The maintenance hatch to the relay bay jammed halfway open. No one moved for it. It was live. Johnathan did; he crossed the corridor through falling sparks without hesitation.

“Kid!” a private shouted.

Johnathan dropped to one knee and tore the relay panel open fully. Heat blasted his face. Wires had fused into a tangled mass, and insulation smoked. The main feed line glowed a dangerous dull orange. He scanned the configuration in less than two seconds. Primary conduit compromised, secondary feed intact but offline. *I can manually bridge it. I might electrocute myself in the process.* He didn’t calculate fear. He calculated the timing.

Another mortar hit. The grid flickered again — weaker this time. Jackson reached him. “Get back!” he shouted.

Johnathan didn’t look up. “Primary will collapse in under ten seconds.”

“I said, get back!” Jackson shouted.

“Hold perimeter,” Johnathan said. He seemed calm.

“You’re exposed.”

That made Jackson pause, because it was true. Rounds were already pinging off the outer barrier surfaces. Johnathan grabbed the insulated wire coil from his pocket — the same one he’d scavenged weeks earlier — and stripped it with his teeth. He bypassed the fused segment and slammed the

exposed copper against the secondary feed node.

Sparks detonated outward. The arc burned through his glove. He did not pull away. He forced the connection down. The relay screamed, then locked. The lights snapped fully back online. The grid stabilized with a deep, resonant hum.

External gunfire intensified — but now it struck solid defense.

The private who had shouted at him grabbed his shoulder. “You could’ve fried yourself!”

Johnathan blinked once, “So?”

The private stared. Jackson stepped between them. “He stabilized the grid.”

Smoke curled from Johnathan’s glove. Jackson grabbed his hand and peeled back the fabric. The skin beneath was reddened, blistering.

“You’re burned,” Jackson said.

Johnathan looked at the injury as if it belonged to someone else. “I’m fine.”

Jackson stared at him. “You don’t get points for pain tolerance.”

Johnathan tilted his head. “I said I’m fine.”

The grid absorbed another round outside. The corridor vibrated with impact. Jackson held his gaze for a moment.

Then he squeezed his shoulder — harder than necessary.

“Next time,” he said, “you wait for an order.”

Johnathan studied him. “You were three steps too far.”

Jackson felt that land. It wasn’t an insult. It was a fact.

OUTSIDE THE WALLS

The attack lasted twelve minutes. Mortars walked the perimeter methodically, probing for weakness. The Jerald-backed militia tested the grid for collapse, but thankfully, it didn't collapse. The manual bridge held. When the bombardment finally eased, Bravo-12 deployed outward to sweep for secondary assault teams.

Jackson paused at the exit and glanced back. Johnathan stood near the relay bay, watching. He wasn't shaken or proud; he was just observing. Jackson approached him. "You moved before anyone else."

"Yeah, so?" Johnathan said.

"Why?" Jackson asked.

"The conduit would have failed," Johnathan said.

"And?" Jackson asked.

"The structure would have been breached," Johnathan said.

"And?" Jackson asked.

Johnathan's eyes shifted briefly toward the outer doors.

"You were near the perimeter."

Jackson felt something tighten under his ribs. "You prioritized me," he said.

Johnathan considered the wording, "Yes." It was not

defiance. It was not a confession. It was alignment.

Jackson exhaled. "That's not how this works."

Johnathan did not argue, but he didn't agree either.

AFTERMATH

Later, when medics properly treated the burn, one of the older Chiefs watched Johnathan with open suspicion. "He doesn't react," the Chief said to Jackson.

"He reacts," Jackson said. "Just differently."

"That's not always better," the Chief said.

Jackson didn't respond. He replayed the moment at the relay. Johnathan had no hesitation, no flinching; he had no instinctive recoil from the exposed current. It hadn't looked brave. It had looked inevitable, and that unsettled him more than recklessness would have. In some ways, the kid was a machine.

THAT NIGHT

When the outpost fell quiet again, Jackson found Johnathan sitting alone near the exterior blast door, listening to the wind press against the reinforced metal. "You could've died," Jackson said.

"Yeah," Johnathan said with a shrug.

"You didn't even blink," Jackson said.

“The conduit needed to be fixed,” Johnathan said.

“That’s not what I mean,” Jackson said.

Johnathan turned. “You think I should have hesitated?”

“I think you should care,” Jackson said.

“I do,” Johnathan said.

Jackson frowned. “About what?”

Johnathan answered without delay. “I care about you, this

team, and this place,” he said.

The words landed more heavily this time. Not because of sentiment, but because of its precision. Jackson sat beside him. Snow hissed against metal outside.

“You don’t build your whole world around one person,”

Jackson said. “That’s dangerous.”

Johnathan looked forward. “The world collapsed already.”

Jackson had no answer to that. For the first time since the storm, he wondered whether saving the boy had altered more than the kid’s survival probability. He wondered what he had just pulled inside the walls.

CHAPTER VI

THE TUNNEL

The transit tunnels beneath southern Havelon had been designed for efficiency. Long, straight corridors. Reinforced curvature. Maintenance alcoves every fifty meters with power rails inset along both sides. They had not been designed for war, but war preferred geometry. Bravo-12 descended through a service shaft just before 0300 hours.

“Cache confirmed below frostline,” Chief Lorrin said over squad comms. “Jeraldi-aligned militia using abandoned freight tunnel as staging node.”

Jackson checked his rifle chamber, clear, loaded, safety off. He glanced back. Johnathan stood near the rear of the formation. He had not been ordered to come. He had followed anyway; the team was starting to think of the boy as a good-luck charm. Jackson argued that the boy should not be allowed to accompany them on patrol, but Chief Lorrin, for some crazy reason, overruled him. They even gave him a rifle.

“Stay in front of the last man in the patrol,” Jackson told him quietly. Johnathan nodded once, not submissive, but acknowledging.

The air underground felt different. Colder in a way that didn’t bite — just lingering. Sound carried strangely down here as boots echoed farther than expected. Breathing felt amplified. Jackson felt the pressure of enclosure — the subconscious awareness that retreat required turning around in a space barely wide enough for two men abreast. Thermal scans showed faint heat signatures ahead — equipment, not bodies.

“Movement,” the point man said in a low voice. Jackson’s pulse ticked upward. Then the shot came from behind. A suppressed crack. The last man in formation dropped without a sound. Blood sprayed against the tunnel wall in a fine mist that immediately began to freeze.

“Rear contact!” someone shouted₄₃

The tunnel detonated into chaos. Jeraldi-backed militia poured from a maintenance breach behind them, compact weapons flashing in tight bursts. The confined space amplified every gunshot into concussive thunder. Jackson pivoted and fired. One hostile down. Another ducked behind a structural rib. Rounds ricocheted off reinforced steel, throwing sparks into the air like metal rain.

Johnathan moved forward. He saw the breach point before anyone else. He saw the attackers' angle. He saw a gap. He slipped into it.

“Kid!” Jackson shouted, too late.

The side corridor was narrower than the main tunnel. Barely a shoulder width. Emergency lights flickered dim red, casting everything in arterial glow. Johnathan moved low and fast. Ahead, he heard breathing, not panicked, but measured. Probably waiting.

The Jeraldi fighter had retreated deliberately, drawing pursuit into the confined space. Johnathan slowed and adjusted his weight to the balls of his feet. He rounded the corner and collided chest to chest. The man was older, bearded. Surprise flickered across his face — then calculation. Both dropped rifles instinctively, too close. Hands grabbed, the man was stronger. He slammed Johnathan into the wall hard enough to crack the concrete. Air punched from his lungs. The man's

forearm pressed across his throat. He reached for his sidearm.

Johnathan did not struggle wildly. He did not thrash. He shifted. He drove his forehead forward into the man's nose. Bone crunched and blood sprayed. The man swore and reeled backward half a step. The pistol cleared its holster.

Johnathan trapped the man's wrist against the wall. The pistol fired. The shot went wide, deafening in the confined space. Johnathan twisted his body inward while pulling his combat knife from its sheathe. The knife came up. He did not shout. He did not snarl. He drove the blade under the man's jawline, upward, hard, the first push met resistance. He adjusted the angle and pushed deeper. The blade slid through soft tissue into heat.

The man's eyes widened. His eyes locked with Johnathan's, and he held his gaze. The man tried to speak, but blood bubbled from his mouth instead. He clawed weakly at Johnathan's wrist. Johnathan twisted the blade. Felt cartilage give. The man's strength ebbed.

They stood there. Forehead to forehead. Breath mixing. The tunnel filled with the metallic scent of blood. Johnathan waited for something, but nothing came. The body sagged, and he let it drop. It hit the concrete with a heavy, final sound.



Back in the main tunnel, Jackson's rifle clicked dry. He slammed a new mag in and advanced with the squad. The militia fighters broke formation and fled deeper into maintenance shafts. The ambush collapsed. Silence fell in broken pieces.

"Status!" Lorrin shouted.

"Rear clear!" a private shouted, "Two hostiles down!"

Jackson looked toward the side corridor. It was Empty.

He moved.

The red emergency light flickered over the body first.

Then over Johnathan. Standing with a knife in hand. Blood dripping steadily from the tip.

"How did you—" Jackson said.

Johnathan wiped the blade against the dead man's coat.

"There were no options," he said. There was calm in his voice.

Jackson crouched beside the body. The wound was

intimate, close, and deliberate.

"You were face-to-face," Jackson said.

"Yes," Johnathan said.

"You looked at him," Jackson said.

"Yes," Johnathan said.

"And you just... pushed," Jackson said with surprise in

his voice.

"Yes," Johnathan said.

Jackson felt the cold of the tunnel creep up his spine.

“Do you feel anything?” he asked.

Johnathan paused. He scanned internally, “No,” he said.

The answer was immediate. Not defensive, or proud, not even hollow. He just felt factual.

Jackson swallowed. “You don’t even feel relief?”

“He tried to kill me,” Johnathan said.

“That’s not what I mean,” Jackson said.

Jackson stood, “Most people... carry it.”

“Carry what?” Johnathan asked.

“The weight,” Jackson said.

Johnathan looked down at the body. He searched himself. There was no weight. Only confirmation of survival.

“If there is no weight,” he asked, “what then?”

Jackson had no answer.

AFTERMATH

Back at the outpost, medics treated a deep bruise forming along Johnathan’s throat and a split lip from the collision. He didn’t flinch during cleaning. He didn’t stare at the wall. He didn’t stare at his hands. He sat still. As if waiting for the next task.

Jackson stood outside the med bay. Chief Lorrin approached.

“He killed one of them up close,” Jackson said.

“I saw,” Lorrin said.

“He didn’t react,” Jackson said.

Lorrin studied him. “Most don’t the first time, maybe shock.”

Jackson shook his head. “No. This was different.”

Lorrin’s eyes hardened. “He’s a hardened survivor.”

Jackson exhaled. “That’s not all he’s doing.”

Lorrin held his gaze. “You pulled him out of a storm,

PO3. You don’t get to be surprised when he survives like something that learned too early.”

The words landed heavily. Jackson didn’t respond.

THAT NIGHT

Jackson couldn’t sleep. He lay on his cot, staring at the ceiling, replaying the angle of the blade. The stillness after. The eye contact. He’d seen hardened soldiers break after their first close kill. Vomiting behind barricades. Hands shaking uncontrollably. Numb laughter that bordered on hysteria. Johnathan had none of it. He’d reset. Like flipping a switch.

Jackson rose and walked through the corridor. He found

Johnathan seated near the outer wall again, staring at nothing.

“You didn’t hesitate today,” Jackson said.

“People who hesitate end up dead,” Johnathan said.

“You went for the kill,” Jackson said.

“Yeah,” Johnathan said.

Jackson felt something fracture quietly inside him. Not

fear of the boy. Fear of what he had anchored himself to. “You can’t become empty,” Jackson said.

“I’m not,” Johnathan said.

“Then what are you?” Jackson asked.

Johnathan considered. “Efficient.”

The word echoed in the narrow corridor. Jackson realized then: The boy didn’t lack morality. He lacked generalization. He would kill without hesitation, but not randomly, not for chaos, for alignment.

CHAPTER VII

MORNING LIGHT

At 0600, the artificial lights shifted to the day cycle. Jackson was already up. He found Johnathan at the perimeter wall overlooking southern Havelon, where the reinforced glass panels gave a filtered view of the white ruins beyond. Wind dragged snow across broken rooftops in long, restless sheets. Johnathan stood perfectly still.

“You don’t talk like anyone your age,” Jackson said.

“I don’t know a lot of people my age,” Johnathan said.

Jackson stepped closer. “When I killed my first up close person,” he said slowly, “I didn’t sleep for three nights.”

Johnathan finally turned his head. “Why?”

“I kept seeing his face,” Jackson said.

Johnathan thought about that. “I see his face,” he said.

Jackson searched his expression. “And?”

“It doesn’t change much,” Johnathan said.

Jackson felt something shift in his chest. “That’s not the point.”

Johnathan’s brow creased faintly. “What is the point?”

Jackson struggled. Words felt clumsy compared to bullets. “The point is it should matter.”

“It mattered,” Johnathan said.

“How?” Jackson asked.

“He was trying to end me,” Johnathan said.

“That’s not what I mean,” Jackson said.

Silence stretched between them. Wind hissed against the reinforced glass. Jackson leaned his forearms on the barrier. “Most people carry weight after something like that.”

Johnathan considered. “You believe caring some weight is proof of humanity.”

“Maybe,” Jackson said.

Johnathan searched himself again — methodically, like scanning his own mind. “I don’t feel any weight.”

Jackson exhaled. “Then what do you feel?”

“Stability,” Johnathan said. The word landed heavily.

Jackson watched him. “No sadness?”

“Why?” Johnathan said.

“Does that matter?” Jackson asked.

“Yes,” Johnathan said.

“I didn’t know him,” Johnathan said.

“So that makes it easier?” Jackson asked.

“It makes it what it is,” Johnathan said.

Jackson stared at him. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Johnathan said.

“He had a life,” Jackson pressed. “Maybe family.” “He

chose engagement,” Johnathan said.

“That doesn’t erase who he was,” Jackson said.

“It doesn’t change the end result either,” Johnathan said.

Jackson’s jaw tightened. “Outcome isn’t everything.”

“It is if you’re alive,” Johnathan said.

Jackson stepped back. For the first time, frustration flared. “You don’t get to reduce the world to survival metrics.”

Johnathan met his gaze without flinching. “The world reduced itself.” The words weren’t angry. They were observational. They were almost impossible to argue with.

A silence settled between them — not hostile, but heavy.

Then Johnathan asked, quietly: “Do you regret it?”

“The kill?” Jackson asked.

“Yes,” Johnathan said.

Jackson hesitated. “I regret that it was necessary.”

Johnathan nodded, “That’s inefficient.”

Jackson almost laughed — a short, humorless sound.

“Yeah. It is.”

Johnathan studied him more closely than usual. “You feel weight,” he said.

“Yes,” Jackson said.

“Does it make you weaker?” Johnathan asked.

Jackson considered that. “Maybe,” he said.

“Then why keep it?” Johnathan asked.

Because it keeps me from becoming you. The thought flashed through his mind before he could stop it. He did not say it aloud. Instead, he said, “Because it reminds me I’m not just reacting. I’m choosing.”

Johnathan absorbed that. “You believe I am not choosing.”

Jackson hesitated. “I think you choose differently.”

Johnathan’s eyes narrowed — not in anger, but in concentration. “How?”

“You choose alignment,” Jackson said.

“Sure,” Johnathan said.

“You don’t choose right or wrong,” Jackson said.

“What is right or wrong in a war zone?” Johnathan said.

Jackson studied him. “Fair,” he said.

“It’s more like survive or die,” Johnathan said. “It’s more... binary.”

Jackson felt something cold slide under his ribs.

THE QUESTION OF FEAR

Later that afternoon, while cleaning weapons in the maintenance bay, Jackson tried again. “Do you ever get scared?” he asked casually.

Johnathan didn’t look up. “My heart races when things get tough.”

“I’m not sure that’s fear,” Jackson said.

“Then what is?” Johnathan asked.

Jackson wiped oil from the rifle barrel and thought.

“Fear is the awareness you might lose something that matters.”

Johnathan paused. He stared at the rifle in his hands for several seconds. “Yeah, I ‘m aware of that.”

“Do you feel it?” Jackson asked.

“Yes,” Johnathan said.

Jackson’s eyes lifted. “When?” he asked.

Johnathan answered more slowly this time. “When you and the team are exposed.” The words were quiet, measured.

Jackson’s breath caught. “And when you were in that warehouse?” he asked.

Johnathan blinked once. “I thought I was going to die.”

“And?” Jackson asked.

“I was okay with it,” Johnathan said.

Jackson felt the cold again, “Why?”

Johnathan’s gaze shifted past him toward the far wall.

“There was nothing left to hold on to.”

The sentence landed like a structural fracture. Jackson realized something then that he hadn’t allowed himself to see

clearly: The absence he feared wasn't cruelty. It wasn't sadism. It wasn't even detachment. It was a vacancy; there had been nothing anchoring Johnathan to survival until now.

NIGHT

That evening, Jackson lay awake again, but this time the tunnel kill wasn't replaying. Jackson realized something that unsettled him deeply: Johnathan did feel fear. Just not for himself, and that might be far more dangerous.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHILDREN IN SECTOR E

The call came just after mid-morning.

Supply convoy pinned in Sector E. Sniper fire from residential block. Medical unit requesting extraction.

Sector E had been labeled abandoned six weeks prior. On Seti-Prime, abandoned meant underreported. Bravo-12 moved fast.

The wind was moderate that day — enough to distort sound but not enough to hide movement. Snow drifted lazily through the skeletal remains of mid-rise housing blocks, their windows blown out long ago. Jackson scanned rooftops as they advanced.

“Thermal’s unstable,” one of the squad said. “Building retains residual heat.”

Which meant someone could hide inside the noise. They reached the convoy — two armored carriers stalled behind a collapsed transit barrier. A medic crouched behind the rear tire of the second vehicle, returning fire blindly.

“Roofline, third floor!” he shouted.

Jackson pivoted. Muzzle flash flickered from a shattered window. Then vanished.

“Move!” Chief Lorrin shouted.

Bravo-12 split into two elements — one suppressing, one clearing the building. Jackson took point. Johnathan was already at his shoulder.

INSIDE

The lobby doors hung open. Snow had drifted into the ground floor, packing thick against the walls. The smell hit first, dust, and something metallic beneath it.

“Clear left,” Jackson said.

They moved from room to room. Most were empty.

Then they found the first sign that Sector E wasn’t abandoned.

A blanket and a pile of salvaged ration packs. A small

handprint in dust near a radiator that no longer worked.

Jackson’s jaw tightened.

“Civilians inside,” he said over comms.

Above them, another shot cracked from the roof. Return

fire answered from the street. The building shuddered as a

mortar landed somewhere nearby.

“Speed it up,” Lorrin said.

They moved to the second floor. A door slammed

somewhere ahead. Jackson pivoted. “Contact!”

They pushed through the hallway. One apartment door

hung crooked on broken hinges. Inside—three children, two

girls, one boy. Huddled behind an overturned refrigerator unit

like it was a fortress. Their mother lay near the window, still.

Blood frozen along her hairline.

Johnathan stopped for half a second. The sight aligned

too closely with a memory he did not revisit willingly. Snow

drifting through an open wound in a wall. A body beneath

insulation dust. He did not linger.

“Take them!” Jackson shouted. He grabbed the smallest

girl — she couldn’t have been more than five. Her hands

clutched at his armor instinctively. A private lifted the boy. One of the girls looked at Johnathan.

“Is she sleeping?” she asked, pointing toward her mother. Johnathan did not answer. He did not soften the truth. He did not lie.

Jackson didn’t hear the exchange. He was already moving toward the hallway.

“That building is going to Collapse!” someone shouted over comms.

The building trembled again. Mortar correction was tightening. The sniper was walking rounds toward the convoy’s suppressive fire pattern. Johnathan stood in the doorway.

“What are you doing?” Jackson shouted.

“The sniper has repositioned,” Johnathan said. “Upper roofline. Northwest corner.”

“We’re evacuating!” Jackson shouted.

“If we leave now, mortar correction will track our exit.”

Jackson stepped toward him. “We do not leave civilians!”

Johnathan’s eyes shifted briefly to the girl staring at him. Then to Jackson. Probability split in his mind. Protect three unknown variables. Protect one anchor. The math was not equal. The building shuddered violently. Ceiling plaster cracked.

“Move!” Jackson shouted again.

Johnathan stepped past him. Not toward the stairs down.

Toward the stairwell up.

“You can’t—” Jackson shouted.

But he was already gone.

THE ROOF

He took the steps three at a time. Gunfire echoed from below. Another mortar thudded somewhere close. The stairwell door to the roof was half-blocked by debris. He forced through it. Cold hit immediately. Wind tore across the open surface. The sniper was prone behind a low ventilation stack, adjusting aim.

He saw Johnathan at the same moment Johnathan saw him. The rifle cracked. The round grazed Johnathan’s shoulder, tearing fabric and skin. He did not break stride. Johnathan closed on him. Too close for a clean second shot.

Johnathan tackled the sniper into the snow coving the roof. The rifle skidded away. The man reached for a sidearm. Johnathan’s hand closed around the weapon first. He ripped it from the sniper and brought it down across the man’s face, and blood exploded from his nose. Holding the weapon like a crude club, Johnathan continued to bash in the man’s face. The

man's eyes widened — not in rage, but in disbelief. Johnathan hit him again, and the man collapsed. His body was confused and then stopped moving.

Johnathan rolled to his knees and scanned the adjacent rooftop. Two faint heat signatures. Mortar spotters. He brought the sniper's rifle up and instinctively adjusted for wind. He pulled the trigger, and one body dropped. He did it again, but missed, and the second spotter collapsed behind cover. The mortar fire ceased. Below him, the building groaned as if exhaling its final breath.

THE TUNNEL EXIT

Jackson burst through the lower exit into the tram access tunnel with the last child in his arms just as the upper floors partially collapsed. Dust and debris thundered downward, and concrete sheared. He shielded the girl's head with his body. Silence followed in a choking cloud of gray. He coughed, blinking grit from his eyes.

“Headcount!” Lorrin shouted.

“Three accounted!”

Jackson turned—and saw Johnathan descending through drifting debris, blood soaking the sleeve of his coat.

“You were told to evacuate!” Jackson shouted.

“The sniper’s dead,” Johnathan said.

“You left us!” Jackson shouted.

“The sniper had to be stopped,” Johnathan said.

“They could’ve died!” Jackson shouted.

“They didn’t,” Johnathan said, looking at the kids.

The older girl — the one who had asked about her mother — stared at Johnathan. “You killed him?” she asked.

Johnathan met her gaze, “Yes.”

She swallowed, “Thank you.”

That word lingered in the air longer than the gunfire had.

Johnathan did not respond. Something almost shifted in his expression. Not pride or guilt, but recognition that his action altered more than a tactical equation. He didn’t dwell on it.

He turned back to Jackson. “Should we relocate?” he asked.

Jackson looked at him. At the blood on his collar. At the children clinging to his armor. For the first time since the storm, he felt something close to fear. Not of the enemy, but of what this loyalty might cost.

CHAPTER IX

COMMAND REVIEW

The summons came twenty-four hours after Sector E. Jackson was ordered to report to the Sector Command administrative wing at 1400 hours. He knew what it was about before he entered the room.

Sector Command's upper administrative chamber had once been a municipal planning office. Now it held reinforced walls, insulated lighting panels, and a central holo-display that pulsed softly with grid overlays of southern Havelon. Two officers were present. Chief Lorrin stood near the wall, arms folded. Lieutenant Kael — logistics and operations, and a Lieutenant Commander (LCDR) Jackson, whom he had only seen twice before, LCDR Arendt.

Upon entering the room, Jackson came to attention.

"At ease," Arendt said. The word did not relax the room.

"PO3 Jackson," the LCDR said, "this is a post-incident review regarding your auxiliary." The word auxiliary hung in the air. Johnathan did not have a rank. He did not have a file, but he now had attention.

Lieutenant Kael activated the holo. The Sector E building schematic appeared, with red lines tracing movement.

"Auxiliary entered structure without formal assignment," Kael said.

"Auxiliary failed to comply with the evacuation directive." "Auxiliary engaged rooftop sniper in close-quarters combat." "Auxiliary neutralized secondary mortar spotters without authorization."

Kael looked up. "Casualty count?"

"Zero civilians," Jackson said. "Zero friendly."

"Correct," Kael said.

"Enemy?" Kael asked.

"Two confirmed," Chief Lorrin said.

Arendt clasped his hands behind his back. "That is the favorable outcome," he said. Silence followed.

Jackson understood the implication.

“Why did he disobey the evacuation order?” Arendt asked.
“He assessed the sniper,” Jackson said. “Neutralizing the

sniper prevented mortar targeting.”

“That was not his decision to make,” Kael said.

“He was correct,” Jackson said.

Arendt studied him.

“Correct does not equal authorized,” Arendt said.

Jackson held his posture, “Understood, Sir.”

Lorin shifted at the wall. Arendt turned his gaze fully
on Jackson. “PO3. We are not discussing whether the auxiliary
is tactically competent.” He paused. “We are discussing
trajectory.” Jackson felt the word land with greater weight than
any accusation.

Kael tapped another display. A clipped thermal image
from the tunnel engagement appeared. Johnathan and the
Jeraldi fighter were frozen mid-grapple. “The tunnel incident,”
Kael said. “First close kill?”

“Yes, sir,” Jackson said.

“Observed reaction?” Kael asked.

“Controlled,” Jackson said.

Kael raised an eyebrow. “That’s one word for it.”

Arendt stepped forward. “What did you observe, PO3?”

Jackson hesitated. “He did not experience visible shock.”

“Did he experience remorse?” asked Arendt.

“No, sir,” said Jackson.

“Did he express concern?” asked Arendt.

“No, sir,” said Jackson.

“Did he demonstrate instability?” asked Arendt.

“No, sir,” said Jackson.

Arendt nodded. “Then what did he demonstrate?”

Jackson swallowed. “Efficiency.” There it was. The word again.

Arendt let it sit in the air. “Yes,” he said. “Efficiency.”

He turned toward the holo and deactivated it.

“PO3 Jackson,” he said, “do you understand what happens when efficiency operates without moral friction?”

Jackson did not answer immediately. “Yes, sir.”

“And what happens?” Arendt asked.

“It becomes dangerous,” Jackson said.

Arendt nodded once. “And who is it dangerous to?”

The room felt smaller. “Everyone,” Jackson said.

Arendt’s gaze sharpened, “Not quite.” He stepped closer.

“It is dangerous to whoever it aligns against.” The distinction settled like ice.

Lieutenant Kael slid a data pad across the table.

“Preliminary psychological observation,” he said.

Jackson glanced down. The report was brief.

SUBJECT: Unregistered juvenile male. Exhibits

suppressed fear response under stress. Displays accelerated adaptive learning patterns. Shows a narrowed attachment to the assigned Peace Keeper. Minimal evidence of generalized moral hesitation. Recommend monitoring for loyalty distortion.

Jackson read the final line twice: loyalty distortion? He looked up. "He is loyal," Jackson said.

"That is precisely the point," Arendt said.

Jackson straightened. "He saved the grid during the mortar strike."

"We are aware," Arendt said.

"He neutralized the sniper and prevented civilian casualties," Jackson said.

"We are aware," Arendt said.

"He has demonstrated restraint," Jackson said.

Arendt tilted his head, "Has he?"

Jackson paused. "He has not escalated beyond necessity."

"Necessity as defined by whom?" Kael asked.

Jackson did not answer. Arendt stepped closer.

"Corproal. You pulled him out of a storm against orders."

"Yes, Sir," Jackson said.

"You have advocated for him repeatedly," Arendt said.

"Yes, Sir," Jackson said.

"You believe he is worth protecting," Arendt said.

"Yes, Sir," Jackson said.

Arendt studied him carefully. "And if one day his efficiency conflicts with your orders?"

The question landed heavier than any reprimand.

Jackson felt the answer forming before he could stop it, "He won't," he said.

Arendt's eyes narrowed. "That confidence is not

reassuring.”

Silence, then Arendt spoke the word Jackson had been avoiding. “You are building a weapon.”

The room felt colder. Jackson did not flinch. “He is not a weapon,” he said.

“Then what is he?” Kael asked.

Jackson considered, “He’s a survivor.”

Arendt held his gaze. “Survivors without anchors become predators.” The words did not sound cruel; they sounded experienced. He clasped his hands behind his back again. “This is not a disciplinary action,” he said. “It is a warning.” He looked directly at Jackson. “If his loyalty fractures—”

“It won’t,” Jackson said, more firmly than before.

Arendt’s gaze sharpened. “You do not get to decide that alone.”

A pause. “He remains under your supervision,” Arendt said. “Any further unauthorized action, and he will be processed.”

The word landed hard; processed.

Jackson understood exactly what that meant.

“And you?” Arendt asked.

“Sir?” Jackson asked.

“If you cannot remain objective, you will be reassigned,” Arendt said.

The implication was clear. Choose the system, or choose

the boy. Jackson stood there for several seconds. Then: “I remain objective, sir.”

Arendt held his gaze. He did not look convinced.

Jackson left the administrative wing and stepped into the colder corridor beyond. He did not go back to the squad immediately. He stood alone for a moment, taking in the words: loyalty distortion, weapon, and predator.

When Jackson returned to the outpost, Johnathan was waiting near the maintenance bay. He did not ask where Jackson had been. He did not ask what had been said. He looked at him once, measured.

“Something’s up,” Johnathan said.

Jackson paused. “What makes you say that?”

“You seem more cautious than usual,” Johnathan said.

Jackson studied him. “You’re being watched.”

Johnathan nodded. “Yeah, I get that.”

Jackson felt the weight settle deeper. “They think you’re dangerous.”

Johnathan considered, “To whom?”

Jackson did not answer. Johnathan’s eyes held his for a moment. “Do you think I am dangerous?” he asked. The question was not defensive. It was precise.

Jackson stepped closer. “No.”

Johnathan nodded once. “Then we’re good.”

Jackson felt both relief and something darker beneath it.

Johnathan sat on an overturned crate, field-stripping a rifle

with clinical precision. He had learned fast. His fingers moved through disassembly steps with mechanical confidence — release pin, slide bolt, inspect chamber, wipe carbon residue, re-seat. Jackson leaned against the far workbench, watching. He had been studying the boy for days now — not as a civilian, not as a charge, but as something that might someday exceed him.

THE NAME

Over the next six months, combat had ebbed into a tense stillness across Sector D. Not so much peace, but exhaustion. It was typical in a combat environment. Wind dragged low across the broken city like something too tired to howl. Inside the outpost, the maintenance bay hummed with low power draw. Drone racks blinked in an idle sequence. The air smelled of metal, oil, and heated polymer.

The recruitment terminal did not look important. It was bolted to a wall in a repurposed administrative room on the second floor of Sector Command — a place that had once processed transit permits and housing requests, now it processed bodies. Jackson stood beside it in full uniform.

SHAMON HARPER

Johnathan stood half a step behind him. He was taller now than when Jackson had pulled him from the storm. He was lean and sharp. The war had not softened him, but had given him direction.

“You understand what this means,” Jackson said.

“Yes,” Johnathan said.

“Once you enter, you’re not just surviving anymore,”

Jackson said.

“I got it,” Johnathan said.

Jackson almost smiled, “Yeah.” He gestured to the terminal. “Go ahead.”

The screen flickered to life.

**UNITED SYSTEMS SECURITY COALITION
DEFENSE RECRUITMENT IDENTITY
REGISTRATION REQUIRED**

Johnathan stepped forward. The cursor blinked.

First field:

LEGAL NAME

He stared at it.

The word legal felt abstract. He had never had documentation beyond temporary civilian registries that dissolved when infrastructure collapsed on Seti-Prime.

He typed:

J O H N A T H A N

He stopped. The letters glowed faint blue. The cursor

blinked patiently. Then he entered a space into the system. He looked at Jackson for a brief moment. Then typed his last name.

He typed:

K E N N E T H

“Sounds like you have two first names,” Jackson said.

“Yeah, I can’t take credit for that,” Johnathan said.

“In boot camp and all through your career, people are just going to call you Kenneth,” Jackson said.

“Yeah,” Johnathan said. “I get it.”

Johnathan hit the enter key on the holopad. The terminal chimed softly.

IDENTITY ACCEPTED

Johnathan Kenneth. The name settled into the system.

The next screen loaded automatically.

ENLISTMENT OATH REQUIRED

Jackson stepped closer but did not touch him.

Johnathan read the words.

I affirm my loyalty to the United Systems Security Coalition and its lawful command authority...

Loyalty. The word carried weight now. He spoke the oath evenly. No tremor or hesitation.

But when he reached:

...and I will defend my fellow service members against all threats...

He glanced briefly at Jackson. Just once and then continued.

...foreign and domestic, without reservation.

Without reservation. The phrase landed differently. He

did not feel weight, but clarity.

The system chimed again.

RECRUIT ACCEPTED

Johnathan Kenneth.

United Systems Security Coalition.

Status: Active Probationary Enlistment.

Jackson let out a slow breath. "It's official," he said.

Kenneth turned toward him.

"Does it feel different?" Jackson asked.

Kenneth searched internally. No, and yes. "Yes," he said.

"How?" Jackson asked.

"I chose it," Kenneth said.

Jackson nodded. "That matters."

Kenneth looked at his reflection in the dark terminal screen. The face was the same. The eyes were the same, but the anchor had shifted. Johnathan had been a survivor of a collapse. Kenneth was aligned to structure. To Jackson. To the Coalition. To forward motion.

"Do you regret it?" Jackson asked.

Kenneth met his gaze. "No."

Jackson studied him.

As they stepped out into the corridor, one of the other PO3s passed by. "Hey, kid," he said. "What's your name?"

Kenneth didn't look at Jackson.

He didn't hesitate. "Kenneth."

The name felt solid. The PO3 nodded casually and

moved on. Jackson watched him for a long moment. “You don’t look different,” he said.

“I’m not,” Kenneth said.

Jackson shook his head, “No. You are.”

Kenneth didn’t ask how. He didn’t need to. He felt it.

The storm had almost taken him. The tunnel had tested him. Sector E had clarified him. Command had examined him. But this—this was the first thing he had chosen that wasn’t about survival. And that made it more dangerous than any knife.

That night, Kenneth stood at the reinforced window overlooking Havelon. Snow moved across broken rooftops in thin sheets. The city remained collapsed. The war remained unresolved, but he was no longer an unregistered variable in its ruins. He had a name. He had alignment. He had a future trajectory.

Behind him, Jackson watched quietly. He did not see a weapon. He did not see a predator. He saw something rarer. A boy who had rebuilt himself from collapse. He also saw what Command had warned him about.

Kenneth did not look back at him. He didn’t need to. He knew Jackson was there. He felt it like a structure beneath his feet. For the first time since the storm, He did not calculate probability. He calculated forward.

CHAPTER X

FORWARD VECTOR

The transport shuttle did not announce departure. It vibrated once. Then began its ascent through gray atmosphere. Seti-Prime disappeared beneath cloud cover without ceremony. Kenneth did not look out the viewport. He stood near the rear bulkhead in probationary recruit uniform, hands clasped loosely behind his back. The fabric felt unfamiliar against his skin.

The name patch on his chest read:

KENNETH

He had traced it once earlier. To confirm it was real. Jackson stood across from him in full Peace Keeper armor. Their assignments had already been logged. Kenneth was being transferred off-world for formal military induction. Jackson remained planetary.

The shuttle's engine hum filled the space between them. Other recruits sat along the side benches — some young, some older, some carrying expressions of fear poorly concealed behind rigid posture. Kenneth observed them briefly.

Jackson stepped closer. "You're quiet," he said.

"I'm listening," Kenneth said.

"To what?" Jackson said.

"The machine," Kenneth said.

Jackson almost smiled. "You always do that."

"Machines are consistent," Kenneth said. "People aren't." Kenneth's gaze flicked toward him.

"You understand what happens next," Jackson said.

"Induction. Evaluation. Boot Camp," Kenneth said.

"And after that?" Jackson asked.

"Deployment," Kenneth said.

Jackson studied him carefully. "You'll be under a different command."

"Yes," Kenneth said.

"You won't be able to choose who you align with," Jackson said.

Kenneth paused at that. Alignment had been simple on Seti-Prime. “Yeah, I get it,” Kenneth said.

Silence stretched for a few seconds. The shuttle rocked as it pierced a layer of turbulence. One of the other recruits swore under his breath. Kenneth remained steady. A chime sounded.

Atmospheric exit complete. Prepare for orbital transfer.

The shuttle leveled out. The vibration softened. Gravity felt momentarily unstable as artificial systems recalibrated. Kenneth adjusted automatically, compensating for the shift without conscious thought. Jackson watched that too. Always adjusting. Always stabilizing.

“You’re going to be very good at this,” Jackson said.

Kenneth did not smile. “Competence increases survival.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Jackson said.

“What do you mean?” Kenneth asked.

Jackson studied him. “Hard to kill.”

Kenneth nodded once, “Yes.” The certainty in his voice was not arrogance. Jackson believed him. That belief felt both reassuring and ominous.

The shuttle doors slid open into the orbital transfer station. Cold, recycled air flowed inward. Recruits stood in line. One by one, they stepped forward for biometric

verification. Kenneth moved into position. Jackson remained where he was — planetary personnel were not authorized beyond this point. This was the edge.

Kenneth turned back once. Jackson held his gaze. The line moved. A technician scanned his retinal pattern.

“Name?” the technician asked without looking up.

Kenneth did not hesitate, “Kenneth.”

The gate light turned green. Kenneth stepped forward. Jackson remained behind the line. He watched the boy he had pulled from a storm walk into a machine far larger than either of them. He understood something clearly at last: If Kenneth ever fractured, it would not be from fear. It would be from loss of direction. And direction was something Jackson had helped define. The door sealed. The shuttle bay lights dimmed. Jackson stood alone for a moment longer than necessary. Then he turned back toward the planetary corridor.

EPILOGUE

THE BOY ON SETI-PRIME

Years later—in a different corridor. Under different lighting. A hardened USSCN officer, who just happened to be a selection recruiter for the USSCN Special Operations School, would watch Kenneth move through a breach point with controlled precision and deadly accuracy. Kenneth was a hardened veteran himself.

The officer looked over his file and noticed several deployments to hot spots in the galaxy. Kenneth had a stellar record and, on paper, looked like a great recruit for SpecOps. This wasn't the kid who grew to be a man on Seti-Prime. That kid had been replaced with a freakishly huge, rock-hard frame that screamed ass kicker from top to bottom. After the exercise, the officer pulled Kenneth aside.

“PO3 Kenneth, the teams could use a man like you,” he said.

“Yes, Sir,” Kenneth said with a confident smile on his face. “I believe they could.”