

## Chapter 2: The Silence That Tightens

The station manager was waiting in silence, hunched over a rusted metal desk piled with damp papers, edges curled and yellowed. He leafed through them with slow, almost ceremonial movements, as if each sheet confirmed his suspicions. Harvey stood still by the door, hands at his sides, careful not to disturb the moment. Only his eyes moved, betraying his unease. They clung to the grimy windows surrounding the booth, searching for something he couldn't name.

The station felt frozen in time. Only a few soldiers moved in the background, passing rarely through the field of view. The rest were either asleep or pretending. But Harvey felt it. Every time he entered here, the same impression returned, that he was being watched. Not by people. By the space itself. By the suspicious roundness of the room. By the silent walls that shouldn't have ears but did.

More than once, he'd felt the urge to pull down the heavy red curtains that hung in thick folds from the circular structure. But he held back. He knew well that Stewart hated that gesture. He saw it as a weakness.

"Good evening, Harvey. How are you feeling? I hope I didn't wake you."

His voice was low, dry. Almost absent. He watched him closely, but without warmth. More like an unexpected apparition. A ghost that had walked in without knocking.

"I wanted to speak to you as soon as I could. I couldn't wait until morning. I probably should have. It's late."

He glanced briefly at the clock on the wall. 22:47. Then back at Harvey.

"But I know you. I know you can't sleep when something's on your mind. Neither can I."

"As I told Michael... it's no trouble. I wasn't sleeping. Though I should've been. It's been a long day. And all I want is to pull the curtain and forget it. Maybe tomorrow will be kinder."

He paused, eyes lowered.

"I heard quick steps on the platform. I immediately thought of the soldiers on patrol. No one else would be running at this hour. And I knew someone was coming for me. I hoped... they had news about Adrian and Mason."

Adam said nothing. He studied him briefly with the same expression he used when reading figures off yellowed pages. Curious. But without a smile.

"Hey... what is it with you, mate? Can't sleep? What's bothering you like that?"

"I don't know, sir. I've got this... awful feeling."

Harvey looked around. A faint grimace had settled on his face. He was watching the walls of the office, the windows, the lights that seemed far too steady for that hour.

Adam noticed, but didn't comment straight away. He turned towards one of the windows, letting the diffuse light fall across his profile.

"You've never liked this office, I know that? It's not made to be liked. It's... open. Like a fish tank. Makes you want to tap the glass and walk away. But for me, it's something else. An observation post. I feel like an old detective. I watch. I listen. I make notes, in my head."

A short, heavy pause.

"Anyway, I know you won't understand. No one does."

"I didn't say anything, sir."

Harvey's voice had dropped. Not out of respect, by instinct.

"It's not about the office. It's about being watched. I prefer privacy and quiet. The unseen presence. I can't think straight when someone knocks on the glass just to throw a few empty words at me. If we could just draw the curtains... maybe we could speak without being seen from every corner of the platform."

"Who's going to interrupt us, at this hour?" Adam's voice was barely a vibration, more a thought spoken in passing.

"These curtains are old, Harvey. I don't want to tear them. They carry things... that can't be forgotten. You've no idea what it took to recover them from the house above. I'd risk a lot for you. But not that. Don't ask me for it. You know better, Harvey."

He stopped. His eyes were slightly darkened. Quiet, but firm.

"Incredible. After all these years, you're still the same. Stubborn. Rigid. Unmoving. Will you ever let go of these ideas about my office?"

Harvey gave a barely perceptible nod, a faint smile curling his lips. It wasn't defiance. It was ownership. A quiet pride in not having changed. He liked being seen that way, constant, unshaken, hard to shift.

Despite the friction between them, Adam held a deep trust in him. One that needed no words. He'd watched him grow. Knew him to the core. Not as a subordinate, but as an extension of his own conscience. He had seen him from the moment he was just a mute shadow in a corner of the station, wide-eyed, to the man before him now: quiet, restrained, but still with the same turmoil Adam recognised in himself.

The day he first saw him lived on in memory as if only hours had passed. Twenty years ago. Harvey was thirteen. Alone in London Bridge, swept along by the crowd, pushed by the sirens' scream. Around him, a tide of people descended into the underground like a foaming sea, shaken by an unseen threat. A city broken, splintered, pouring into the dark. In the distance, a dull, metallic boom echoed, a torch swallowing the streets above.

Harvey didn't know whether he was running or searching. He was already in the station. His heart was pounding. Leaning against a cracked advertising panel, he was shouting his father's

and brother's names. But their voices had been swallowed by the world's howl. He'd screamed until his throat tore, like a wound opening deep inside, and now only breath and fear came out.

Then, a hand gripped his wrist. Firm. Certain.

"Stay calm, mate. Don't be afraid. My name's Adam Stewart. I'll look after you."

The voice rang out calm, from a short man with silver at his temples and a moustache trimmed with near-mathematical precision. His features were sharp, carved by heavy years, but the eyes... the eyes held something you couldn't learn. A deep stillness. Almost otherworldly. In that moment, of everything around the boy, only the man's voice remained intact.

From that instant, everything changed.

Adam Stewart, manager of North Greenwich, the man everyone regarded as a kind of inevitable presence, almost abstract, became something else in Harvey's eyes. Not an authority. Not a uniform. A fixed point in a world collapsing into chaos. A pillar. An anchor. He'd raised him without ever claiming that role, with the same silence with which you save your breath when the ground gives way.

To Stewart, the boy was more than just another orphan swept up in the crowd. Harvey was the shadow of the son he'd lost up on the surface, in the fire that consumed everything above North Greenwich, on the day the war tore through the city. No warning. No reason. Just smoke, blood, and absence. Since then, he'd lived among the ruins below, refusing to leave. He remained underground with the quiet stubbornness of someone who refuses to let a wound close. The offers had come, even from the High Council, through an old friend. But he'd turned them all down.

"He's still here. Still here," he sometimes murmured, scanning the crowd as if any face might bring his son back.

In the absence of that lost child, he shaped Harvey. Carved him in silence, day by day. No promises. No hollow words. And what rose from that boy was not just a man, it was a presence. Someone others trusted instinctively, without knowing why. Not for what he said. But because in the heart of chaos, he remained, calm, steady, unshaken.

Stewart had never said the words. He never once called him "my son." But every heavy glance, every long pause, every decision shared in the middle of the night, they all said exactly that.

And still, the pain remained. Quiet. Cold. Alive. The longing never faded. Dust had never settled over the face of the lost boy. He'd accepted living with the wound but not closing it. By staying in North Greenwich, in that same room, on that same chair, he felt he kept him close. In an absurd but honest way, he lived beside a ghost. And Harvey, unknowingly, had become the bridge between life and that absence.

There had never been any need for declarations between them. Only gestures. Silences. Hard decisions made in dimly lit rooms. It wasn't blood that tied them, it was loss. And that hard, quiet respect built slowly, layer by layer, in London's tunnels.

"Harvey, let's get straight to it," Stewart said, shifting register abruptly. "I'm sorry to call you at this hour. But it's serious. If it weren't, I wouldn't have done it."

He leaned slightly over the metal desk, fingers locked around its cold edge.

"Something's broken in the chain. You know that already. I sent two couriers to Canary Wharf. And don't pretend you don't know why I called you. I know how close you are to Adrian."

"You're not disturbing me, sir," Harvey replied, voice low but clear. "A scout doesn't sleep. Truth is, I expected you to call."

His gaze remained lowered. But the tone was firm. No hesitation.

"I told Adrian to stop by when he got back. He never did. You know what's troubling me most? Not his absence. This silence. This weight that's settled over everything. And the thought that maybe we waited too long. That we've hesitated."

The office sank into a dense quiet, like still water between damp walls. Adam took a laboured breath. Then spoke, slowly, measured. Every word felt chosen with care, as if his back bore its weight.

"I understand. I know you wanted something different. So did I. But what's happened can't be undone. It's done. And we, Harvey, we need to look ahead. Let's just hope it's not too late."

The silence that followed wasn't empty. It was full, loaded with everything unsaid.

"Their mission wasn't just mine. Not only. That message was for all of us. For this station. Maybe even for whatever's left of the network. Of the underground system."

Harvey didn't move. His arms were crossed, but his eyes fixed on Adam's face. He knew that tone. He'd heard it before. It was the tone Adam used only when things were close to the edge. When truth was no longer an option, it was a verdict.

Each sentence was a burden placed on a concrete slab already cracked. Each word threatened to break it entirely.

"You probably know. I was summoned to Green Park last month. Monthly meeting. Same as always."

His voice didn't ask questions. Didn't offer answers. It just let the pauses speak.

He didn't explain further. Didn't say what had been discussed. He didn't need to. That silence wasn't hesitation. It was deliberate. An invitation to understand without being told.

Harvey nodded faintly, but his thoughts had already drifted. Adrian. The monthly meeting. All the pieces slowly coming loose, without a sound. Not yet.

"I spoke to everyone," said Adam. "The managers. The advisers. The Chairman of the Council. The topic: the peace treaty. The future. Tunnel trade. Inter-station relations. Station upgrades. Tax reduction. And so on."

His voice remained calm. Too calm.

"We agreed on one thing. If we lose balance now, everything we've built in twenty years goes up in smoke. We go back to 2013. Or 2014. Remember? We were fighting over a bag of rotten mushrooms. A crust of bread. Drinking dirty water, and every swallow meant another death."

Harvey's chest tightened. Not from fear. From the weight of truth. Truth didn't shake or shout. It just settled on your shoulders, cold, like a wet stone.

Silence. They looked at each other. Adam seemed ten years older. Harvey's gaze was the same cold, focused, but alert.

"I understand, sir," he said, voice clear. "But I still don't know exactly what Adrian and Mason were carrying. What was in the message?"

Adam sighed. But not from weakness. Not from resignation. It was frustration, heavy, clamped behind his teeth.

"It was our vote, Harvey. That's all. One vote. But one that could shift everything. Every station has a say. Ours was meant to go to Canary Wharf. From there, it would have reached Green Park. Last time we spoke to our neighbours, they offered to take it. Said he'd hand it to Igor personally."

He stopped. Clenched his fists on the table, wrists taut.

"It was a mistake. Maybe I should have sent you. Not just to the next station. All the way to Green Park."

Inside the office, the words dropped with weight. No echo. Neither of them dared pick them up.

"I backed the idea of an alliance. A network of linked stations. Free trade. Controlled exchange of resources. A first step toward some kind of order. But if our vote's been lost, or intercepted..."

He didn't continue. No need. In the world below, silence spoke louder than words. Sometimes sharper too.

"Those supporting the proposal wanted immediate adoption. The others conflict. Accusations. It broke into shouting. We couldn't reach agreement. They gave us a month. Officially, for consultations. Unofficially... to stall us. But some wouldn't hear of any alliance. Especially stations in the west and north. The Circle Line. Where answers come slowly and promises to

roll out without substance. Delay. Evasion. Lies dressed in courtesy. It was clear they were playing a different game. One they'd been setting up for a long time."

He paused. His voice low, but steady.

"How do you think they gathered so many resources? That fast. No questions. No transparency."

Notting Hill Gate. Salim al-Kadir. He controls practically the entire west of the Tube and part of the north. Officially, just an isolated station. In reality, a structured network with hierarchy, equipment, and discipline. He refuses the alliance because it would mean losing something. They're not poor. They just pretend. They avoid the government-imposed levies. They gather in silence: weapons, food, soldiers, information.

Some like to call it "Salim's Power." Or something else. The name doesn't matter. What matters is what it means: silence around him. A cold fear spreading from station to station. No one asks. No one investigates. People simply avoid.

I warned Igor many times. Told him they were preparing. That they weren't aligning for peace, but for something else. But Igor didn't want to hear it.

"You see, Harvey? I'm afraid it's too late. Maybe we can't stop them anymore. Maybe they won't even need to be stopped. They could officially declare independence, form a separate authority, build their own administration. They already have everything they need."

Salim al-Kadir. The strongest man in the west. He's gathered wealth, weapons, and people. He's starting to attract skilled labour. And some stations along the Metropolitan Line may already be on their side. It's no longer theory. It's a movement. You can feel it in the rhythm of the Tube's breath.

But it's not just about influence. It's about control. Complete control.

He imposes taxes. Not symbolic. Not negotiable. Direct. Brutal. Extortion posing as structure. Every time someone returns from the surface with a load, Salim takes more than half. No explanation. No trial. Just brief orders and armed guards.

The ones who go up risk their lives with every step. For water. For a bag of flour. For two vials of antibiotics. And when they return, if they return, they're robbed. Systematically. Legally. With documents, stamps, and military approval.

Some have begun slipping through old galleries buried for decades. Tunnels forgotten by everyone except desperation. Smuggling has become routine. A calculated risk. A roulette spin with the bullet close to the temple. But for them, better to risk death than to share with Salim al-Kadir's regime. Better fugitives than humiliated. Better darkness than obedience.

To avoid confiscation, traders changed the maps. They learned every detour, every crack in the concrete. They dug. They adjusted. They tried to break out of a system that offered no room for negotiation. But every tunnel carved in silence was a door. A door to something that didn't ask permission. Didn't ask for tax.

The deforms. The ones above.

If a gallery is pushed too far, if someone miscalculates the angle, the depth, the exit point, if they breach a forbidden layer, it won't just be sacks of supplies that come in. It'll be them. And then, neither taxes, nor border guards, nor stations will matter.

Harvey felt his skin tighten against his bones. Like an animal sensing a predator nearby. Years as a scout had shown him enough. He'd seen holes in the tunnels that weren't on any map. Routes dug in silence by human hands, desperate hands. Passages people used to climb without being seen.

He had never really thought about what they might bring down with them.

"They can come down..." he thought, feeling the bitter taste of realisation stick to the roof of his mouth.

Looking back, he couldn't understand how he had ignored it all. He'd seen things. Odd movements. Holes hastily covered. People arriving from places they shouldn't have. But there was always some other urgency. Another order. Another, louder threat.

He should have asked. Stopped it. Noted it down. Now it was too late.

He remembered. Every night when something had felt off. Every silence too deep in the galleries. And above all... those he had seen. Up there. On missions. The deforms. They weren't legend. They weren't folklore. They were real. Broken bodies, but organised. A compact silence that could turn into a scream in a single breath.

He closed his eyes. The memories didn't come as images. They came as sensations. Heavy air. They had looked at them. And maybe now... they were coming down.

The silence had grown heavier than any sound. Guilt, heavier than the weapon on his shoulder. Heavier than armour. It was something alive, pulling him downward.

Adam said nothing now. But his words still hung in the air, like cut cords.

Harvey stood. Slowly. He moved to one of the grimy windows and looked out over the platform. The gas lamps flickered faintly, flames bent by cold currents. The light was just enough to make out shapes. Or to imagine you did.

He stayed there. Quiet. Thinking. About what he knew. About what he hadn't said. About the ones above.

If they'd started digging... if one of the tunnels gave them access... there'd be no time for signals. No sirens. No orders. They would come in. Fast. Without mercy. With teeth. With hands. With silent hate.

The customs officers wouldn't know what hit them. Not at first. One, then another. Then all. They would call to each other, not in panic, but instinctively. That's how they worked. They gathered. Not like beasts. Like soldiers. Organised. Wordless. Without hesitation. No turning back.

Harvey leaned on the frame. The glass was cold. But his thoughts were colder. He knew what he felt. It was too quiet. A suffocating, thick silence that covered everything.

And silence, always, lies.

His eyes stayed fixed on the empty platform. In his mind, a wound that hadn't closed. The last encounter with a deformed. Blood boiling. Ice in his ribs. A silent fire in his lungs. He could still feel the pain when he took a deep breath. But heavier than the pain was the silence after, that echoing void in which nothing could be heard, from outside or within.

Now it was different. He was responsible. Not just for himself but for the station, for its people, for the thin thread of order still keeping it alive.

Adam said nothing. Neither did Harvey. The air in the round office felt heavier than usual. Thoughts drifted between them like unfinished spectres. Then the manager spoke. Slowly. With an edge in his voice.

"If Salim al-Kadir wants control, he'll take it. At any cost. I don't know all his moves, but I know how he looks at people. He doesn't seek alliances. He seeks submission."

He paused. His breathing seemed shorter.

"I met him many times at Green Park. Never once did I feel trust. Not once. I've spoken to Igor dozens of times. Always the same line. That I'm mistaken. That Salim is loyal. Peaceful. Trustworthy."

He turned his gaze to the wall as if the answer no one had given might be written there.

"Faith was never the issue, Harvey. The issue is the man. What he does when he holds power in his hands. And Salim... Salim tightens his grip."

He leaned back. Stared at the ceiling, stained and cracked like a map of hidden routes.

"When I see Igor again I'll remind him of what I said. And I'll ask him once more. Who is he really protecting?"

But Harvey wasn't thinking about Salim anymore. Not now. His thoughts had locked onto something else. The deforms. If they entered the station they wouldn't be stopped. He knew it. He'd seen what they did up there. He'd seen what was left behind. Not rumours. Not reports. Not stories. Corrupted reality.

He closed his eyes for a moment. Tried to push the image away. He'd moved closer to the metal desk. Adam hadn't moved. Silent.

"You can count on me, sir," said Harvey. His voice was quiet but steady. "If there's something I can do, if there's a way to stop the western lot from pushing the wrong button, I'll do it."

Adam looked at him. No reply. Just that. And that was enough.

Then he spoke. Plain. Without decoration.

"I know, Harvey. That's why I called you. And maybe... maybe I should've sent you with the vote. Directly. No roundabout paths. No Mason. No Adrian. But I thought you needed time after the accident. Maybe I was wrong."

The silence in the office became heavy again. Like a door that wouldn't open.

"Now I have something else for you. It's not public. It's not diplomatic. It's risky. And it's yours alone. I trust you won't make me regret it."

He didn't smile. He didn't shake his head. He just looked at him the way you look at someone you're sending into a place from which you'll never return with a settled heart.

After Adam Stewart had laid out every detail of the mission, Harvey had no more doubts. It was time. There was nothing left to add. Everything had been said. Everything had been understood.

Time seemed to slip away, dull, between fingers. Minutes had lost their weight. Each second passed like a spark. Thirty seconds, maybe less. The station manager, still behind his desk, stared at a sheet of paper without seeing it. A silent but pressing guilt gnawed at him. Maybe the vote should have been sent earlier. Two weeks. A month. But now it was late. Irreversibly so.

The mission had begun. Harvey was already inside it. With or without his will. And despite everything hanging in the air, he was the one chosen. The right one. Even if a bit too late.

"When can you leave, Harvey?"

"As soon as possible, sir. I'll grab my pack, check what's missing, and go."

"You don't need much. The pack's ready. I prepared it in advance. I knew it would be you. No one else."

The rucksack was a heavy military model made of dark waxed canvas, with frayed edges and reinforced stitching done by hand. The thick, well-fitted straps still held traces of old damp. Down one side, patches of soot and dried blood told of a restless past. The metal buckles were worn but still functional. It wasn't new. It wasn't decorative. It was a field object. Carried. Dropped. Recovered. A pack that had already been sent to die and returned.

"Spare batteries. Torch. Two days' rations. Eight filters. Two full mags. Three hundred pounds. One calibrated radiation meter."

Harvey hesitated. He looked down at the neatly packed contents.

"Do I really need that much money?"

Adam looked at him calmly.

"You're not heading to the far end of a friendly station. It's a long road. And money is the most efficient way to avoid questions."

Then he pulled from his chest pocket a carefully folded letter and handed it over.

"Harvey, you know how important it is to keep this safe. Everything depends on it. Everything. Every decision. Every step. Every life."

Harvey said nothing. He just nodded slowly. Then slipped the letter between two layers of fabric into a hidden inner pocket. His fingers stayed there for a few seconds, pressing gently like a seal.

They headed for the door. Behind them, the office remained still, sunk in the pale glow of the gas lamp.

"Harvey. One last thing."

Adam's voice was low. Almost a whisper, but sharp.

"The Tube isn't what it used to be. If anyone finds out what you're carrying... they'll rob you. Or kill you. Or something worse. Don't forget that."

Harvey looked him straight in the eye. No hesitation. The skin beneath his eyes was tight, but his tone was ice.

"Let them try, sir."

He walked out.

Somewhere, in a tunnel buried between Canary Wharf and forgetting, Adrian opened his eyes.

Silence. But not the usual silence of the Tube. Not the rhythmic dripping, not the rats rustling. A heavy silence. Compressed. A silence that crushed everything still alive.

He could barely see. Two figures. Above him. A rail vehicle. Slow movement. A headlight cutting through the dark ahead, bricks flickering weakly across the walls. Yet the wheels made no sound. Nothing. Just the hum of a quiet engine and the sense of sliding, not rolling.

Claustrophobia struck from the side. Brutal. It had waited for a single fracture in his breath. Adrian tried to move. He couldn't. His body felt heavy. His head pulsed. His neck locked. The air smelled of metal, rust, and wet fabric.

And something he didn't know how to name.

Two faces. Blurred. One wore a lamp on the forehead. The other held a cigarette between two fingers. No smile. No words. Just empty eyes staring down at him. Like dusty mirrors that reflected nothing back.

Adrian knew he was a prisoner, but his mind couldn't string together what had happened. As if someone had ripped the last few hours out of him and dropped them into a deep pit. The nightmare was too quiet to be a dream. And far too real to be anything else.

He twisted under the straps pinning his torso to the cold floor of the vehicle. Every movement dragged him deeper into the sense of captivity. His chest rose in bursts, not from panic, but from a dense, wet helplessness gathering like a cloud around his throat.

The movement caught the attention of the one in front. A tall figure, slightly hunched, with a headlamp strapped to his forehead. The jumpsuit had once been blue. Now it was a hardened shell of old stains, thickened by oil, dust, and soot. The fabric stuck to lean skin, revealing a wiry frame filled with latent, erratic energy. His boots were old, cracked, split down the sides, squeaking across the metal floor of the vehicle every time he moved a foot. The sound was unreal. Like something out of a mechanical hallucination.

Black hair, long down to the eyebrows, hung dirty over his eyes. The gaze, brown but cold, was opaque. Hard to read. But behind that curtain of hair, a smile pulsed. Thin. Crooked. A smile that didn't need a voice.

"Well now... he's finally awake," he muttered, with a bitter, toxic satisfaction.

The tone was dry. Sharp. Without mercy. The man in front of Adrian wasn't in a rush. He was a man with time. Time to look. Time to dismantle. Slowly.

The other man, more distant but clearly present, stood out in the headlight's beam. Green jacket with faded reflective stripes, covered in dust. A similar jumpsuit but better kept. His face was marked by an old, curved scar that cut across his cheek and stopped at the base of the nose. Clean-shaven jaw. Eyes, a pale blue, lifeless. Too clear. Too steady. Too fixed.

On his head, a worn cap pulled deep over the forehead, with an unreadable insignia. But it wasn't the insignia that commanded respect. It was the silence. The way he stood. Still. Certain. Authoritative.

He held a cigarette between two fingers. The ember glowed faintly, though the wind in the tunnel whipped everything else. In his right hand, clenched tight, was a rusted lever, the brake. He moved it slowly, as if out of habit. He wasn't looking at it. Nor at Adrian. Nor at his companion. Just ahead. Into the dark. As if he already knew what was coming.

Adrian felt reality rebuilding itself slowly, with broken edges. The silence between the two. The smoke. The lever. The unmoving rhythm of the machine. Everything seemed to carry a hidden meaning. And yet he couldn't reach it. He only sensed it. At the back of the neck. In the throat. In the chest.

The danger wasn't moving. But it was there.

"It's time," said the driver. Calm. Almost bored. No blink.

"He's slept enough."

The tunnel had turned into a living mouth. A breathable nightmare. The smell was thick, dense. Burnt cloth. Sulphur. Mould. The air seemed to push back. From the walls. From the floor. The bricks, painted black, reflected the light in a sick, almost hypnotic shimmer.

Everything seemed to breathe. Except him.

Along the tracks, the remains of a torn world. Splintered boards, twisted metal, crushed boxes, melted plastics scattered in chaos, the trail of a desperate escape. The space was no longer just a tunnel. It was a pit. A pit of failures. And from it, nothing seemed to return whole.

Adrian, caught between vertigo and a fury simmering beneath the haze, burst out:

"Who the hell are you, you bastards?"

His voice cracked violently against the brick walls. It bounced back, sharper, broken, multiplied by the emptiness around them. The tunnel swallowed it for a moment, then spat it back out over them with force. It wasn't echo. It was a response.

The silence cracked.

But no one answered. Only the air trembled in the wake of his shout, vibrating like a wire pulled too tight.

Nothing had truly changed, the same dirty light, the same mould stains, the same smell of sulphur and decaying matter. But now everything felt closer. The walls seemed to tighten around them, as if the tunnel was breathing in with him. Every sound was a warning. Every pause, a promise.

The man with the headlamp gave that thin smile again, just at the corners of his mouth. No teeth. No warmth. Just a split in the skin.

"Don't strain yourself. It doesn't matter who we are. Not yet. But you'll know. Very soon."

Adrian bit his tongue. A taste of metal. He tried to gather his thoughts, but everything was shattered. Just fragments. The manager. The document. The departure. Mason.

Mason.

"Mason! What have you done to him?" His voice rose. This time with a note of panic. Real.

A short, twisted laugh rolled across the rails. It wasn't an answer. It was a refusal. An insult.

The pain in his temples pulsed with the rhythm of the unseen wheels. His chest burned with every breath. And in his mind, one thought pressed in:

The document...

"Where is it?! You'll pay for this! If the manager finds out."

The laugh came back. Emptier. Deeper. Like a rusted door opening onto a space where mercy had been forgotten.

Then, silence. Just the hum of metal and the pounding of one clear certainty. It was too late for threats.

Then, for the first time since the journey began, the driver spoke:

"Myles, we're nearly there."

Then, without turning his head:

"In a few minutes, you'll know what to do."

No hesitation. No urgency. Just a statement. Cold. Like an instruction repeated dozens of times.

Without a word, the man in the filthy jumpsuit leaned over Adrian and, with a precise gesture, pulled a black balaclava over his head. The rough fabric closed over his face. The light vanished. The air grew heavier. Direction collapsed. There was nothing left. Just darkness.

"Let it go. Stop, you bastard! Don't you see what you're doing? No!" Adrian's voice cracked through the tunnel like a broken blade, thrashing, shattered by fury, stripped of breath.

He was breathing hard beneath the coarse balaclava, thick with dust and old smells. The fabric smothered his cheek, and beyond it he could feel only the heat of his own breath and the pressure on the back of his skull. Every breath was a struggle. But it wasn't the mask that was choking him.

It was rage.

"It's just a balaclava, not a bullet," the other man said. His calm was a weapon. Not quiet threat. "I prefer this over hitting you. Like I did to your friend. The fat one."

The word hung between them like a filthy cut, torn at the edges. Like a wound scraped with rusted iron.

Adrian couldn't find air. Not from lack of oxygen. From the boil inside him. The fury rising through his throat, blocking his voice. His temples throbbed. His jaw clenched. In his chest, a sharp and buried twitch. He wanted to scream. But something deep held him. Tightened.

Everything he wanted to say, the fury, the shame, the helplessness, twisted beneath the cloth. And below them all, deep, hidden like smoke trapped under rusted iron, despair. He wouldn't let it surface. Not yet.

His hands and feet were tied with rough rope that burned through the clothes into his skin. Ankles bound. Wrists tense. He could only move his head and shoulders slightly. The rest was locked down. His body had become an anchor. A thing to transport. Not a person.

The vehicle continued forward into the dark. Barely perceptible vibrations ran through the floor, up his spine, brushing every nerve. He could see nothing, but he could feel. The floor beneath him. Their breath. The stale sweat. The smell of old petrol and oxidised metal. The darkness was organic. Not absence, but presence. It wrapped him, tested him, surrounded him with intent.

Time had lost its shape. He didn't know if it had been two minutes or twenty. But he knew that every moment worked against him. Against whatever was left to save. If there was anything left at all.

He had no plan. No way out. Just an unspoken impulse, a mute cry, a primitive urge to do something. Anything. But for now, he remained there. Under the mask. Tensed. Burning inside.

Silence had become everything. And within it, one sentence floated between thought and collapse:

This is not how it ends.

Not here. Not now. Not in silence.