

Chapter 4 – We Have Returned

As he moved deeper into the gallery, the air grew heavier, compact, dense like a stagnant fluid, seemingly undisturbed for years. Dampness settled on his skin like a second layer, cold, quiet, persistent. The cold was no longer a sensation. It was a presence. It passed through his clothing like a sheer veil, touching his joints, his chest, his thoughts. No draught. No dripping. Only a thick, mineral silence that blanketed everything, as if the tunnel wasn't just emptied of sound but absorbed whatever dared exist.

Only his steps, even and inevitable, echoed between the narrowing walls, reverberating mechanically like a clock ticking inside a blind room, where time no longer passed, only persisted. An echo that no longer frightened anyone. Not even him.

The weak beam of his headlamp broke against every surface, casting soft, trembling shadows that slid along the walls like silhouettes exhausted by their own existence. Misshapen spectres that danced only enough to observe him. If he looked at them, they withdrew. He didn't look. His gaze remained forward. Not out of fear, but because he knew that in this place, the things you didn't look at were often less dangerous than the ones you examined too closely.

He'd been here countless times. So often that his mind had stopped counting. Every curve, every exposed copper wire, every faded marking on the walls. Together they formed a map no longer drawn on paper but inscribed in footsteps, in blood, in muscular memory. The darkness had become a part of him, just as the gallery had become part of a world he could no longer leave behind.

Darkness hadn't frightened him in a long time. Not because he had conquered it, but because it had become familiar. Not friendship. Not truce. Coexistence. Darkness moved with him, in him, around him. Like an old dog that no longer barks but never leaves your side. Its presence wasn't aggressive. It was constant. Almost necessary.

Sometimes he wondered if he even needed light anymore. Not for direction, but to reassure himself the world still existed, that his eyes still had something to see, that matter had not vanished altogether.

Darkness wasn't something he crossed. It was something he carried. It had become the equivalent of his own shadow.

He adjusted the lamp on his forehead. A reflexive motion, executed without thought, just another step in a survival routine. The light rose slightly, stabilising, casting a pale, undefined glow across a wall slick with condensation. In that dense dark, every detail mattered not for what it was, but for what it prevented: thought.

The tunnel absorbed him slowly, with merciless precision. The damp, the cracks, the dead cables, the dark streaks of rust. All part of a ritual of recognition. It wasn't danger. It was silent recognition. Perhaps even acceptance.

And his mind, pushed by the monotony of his steps, began to drift. Not into dreams. Into memory. The same tunnel. Another time. A different light. A different self.

Eighteen years old. Rifle slung loosely on his shoulder, a natural extension of the coarse uniform, and a fragile idea of order. One of seven. Recruits with no experience but straight backs, clear eyes, and the stubborn hope that the underground could be subdued. That chaos could be tamed. That stations could become fortresses, not just improvised shelters. In the early days, they believed they were many. Within weeks, they were four.

Training wasn't about speeches. No flags. No rituals. Just cold, dirty water, and exercises that broke you down slowly, without explanation. Neglected wounds. Repetitions to the point of collapse. Brutal questions with no need for poetic answers, cutting fantasies open like wounds. They were trained to breathe through smoke, to keep their eyes open in the face of fear, to stop bleeding with three fingers, and to fire without error. No revision. No correction. Only consequence.

Then came practice. North Greenwich. The blind zone.

A place no one entered without a written order, where ruptured pipes spat black steam and black water to the rhythm of clipped instructions. Targets weren't silhouettes. Just soot stains on damp concrete walls. Bullets, pried from old casings, were counted by hand.

The drills came without warnings. Instructions were whispered, not repeated, barely audible over the tension in metal and breath. The explosions didn't leave marks on the walls. Only in them.

That's how you learned underground. Not through trust. Not through theory. Through exhaustion. Through silence. Through loss.

Years later, as a scout wearing the mask, children would look at him with the same wide eyes. Not because he had saved anyone. He hadn't. But because he walked upright. Because he seemed whole. Because he had gone into the dark and returned. And in their world, that alone was enough.

He'd raise a hand in silent greeting, the gesture blurred behind the visor. He knew they didn't understand exactly what they were seeing. But perhaps, one of them, quietly, understood that moving forward was possible. That not everyone collapses. That sometimes, simply existing, still alive, is heavier than glory.

Instructors never raised their voices. Never repeated themselves. Every sentence was final, spoken once, with a weight that didn't come from tone, but from truth.

"Don't shoot if you don't have to. Don't shoot if you want to stay alive."

He understood. It wasn't a warning. It was law.

And he hadn't forgotten. Not a single lesson.

In the darkness of the real tunnel, he no longer needed landmarks. Only balance between his steps, and the silence between them. A silence that didn't mean safety. It meant awareness. Discipline.

"Don't shoot if you want to stay alive." It returned again and again, not as a command, but as a fact. Coal targets. Wet walls. Muted blasts. The instructor's voice cut into silence: "Don't shoot if you want to stay alive."

None of it had vanished. Only silence remained between him and the memory.

He moved slowly through the tunnel. Not because he wasn't afraid. But because he knew too well what fear did when you started to run. It made you loud. Erratic. Predictable.

That year, out of seven, only two remained. Harvey and another boy, quieter, quicker in his movements, his eyes blinking rarely. The rest hadn't gone in fire, but in wrong steps, in decisions taken too soon. It hadn't been friendship. Nor competition. Just selection. Slow. Irreversible. Without notice.

When only two were left, the organisers abandoned the old protocol. The final stage, designed as a solitary trial of endurance, was reworked into a joint mission. Not out of pity. Not adaptation. But because someone, somewhere, wanted to see how far a man could go when he had no other option but to keep going. Together. Or fall.

And it wasn't a standard test. It was harsher. Longer. Quieter. A challenge that didn't test you on the surface, but in the deep, untouched places of your own nature.

Harvey remembered it all with clinical precision. The narrow gallery linking North Greenwich to Canary Wharf. The same path he walked now. A rusted spine, low-ceilinged, crossed by slanted metal beams that hung like warped ribs over anyone passing through. The walls, blackened brick layered with mould, seemed to breathe with their footsteps. The air was thick, ancient, with no clear scent, but a density that stuck to the lungs, caught in the throat, turned every word into effort.

There was no room for error. Nor for weakness. There, in that space that forgave nothing, everything you didn't know about yourself surfaced like an old wound reopened without anaesthetic.

Though there were only two of them, their footsteps echoed in irregular, maddening rhythms, bouncing off the walls from impossible directions. Sometimes from ahead. Sometimes from the side. As if someone, or something, walked with them. Constant. Invisible.

They reached the end of the metal stairs, where a sealed door marked the boundary. There were no instructors. No signs of command. No surveillance. Just cold metal, and the dense silence of the underground. They were alone. And about to step into the unknown, with one certainty: there was nothing left to lose.

Harvey checked the mask. The motion was precise, silent, unhurried. Learned. He didn't put it on, just ran his fingers along the straps, the filters, a reflex more than a need. Then he switched on his headlamp. The beam barely cut through the suspended dust, not illuminating but forcing space to take shape around him. A weak incision in the dark, yet enough to walk.

The other held the map. The paper was thin, almost translucent, smudged at the edges and blotched by damp, but incredibly accurate. The route between galleries, blocked segments, rusted gates, network nodes, all sketched by hand, with obsessive clarity.

The location was marked. A military pack, abandoned in a structure near Canary Wharf. The mission was simple on paper. But in truth, it was something else. The distance wasn't the challenge. Everything between that point and the moment of return was.

The tunnels themselves had been part of the test. But the return... required surfacing at Canary Wharf and re-entry through the sealed gate in North Greenwich. It wasn't far. But it was something else. A crossing through an unstable zone, ruined, where nothing was guaranteed. It was said mercenaries operated there, sometimes on behalf of isolated stations, sometimes for no one. An undeclared war, fought in rubble, between contracts and clans who fired in silence, without signals, without explanations.

But there was another threat. Older. Quieter. Faceless. Nameless. Just traces. Thin scratches on concrete, edges worn down by nails, or something else. Footprints that didn't repeat. And sounds. Not echoes. The kind that slipped in.

Harvey tightened his vest. Every movement was calculated. Silent. Unhurried. His mask already covered his face. His voice came through the filter low, mechanical, barely more than mist:

"I don't know about you... but I've waited years for this. To see the city. Not just ruins. The whole of it. What's left. With my own eyes."

Beside him, his partner said nothing. But his eyes, wet, trembled behind the visor. It wasn't paralysing fear. It was real fear. Unvarnished. Raw. But accepted. True.

A sentinel, leaning against the wall of the decontamination room near the sealed door, shifted his weight slightly and watched them in silence. An old man, with dry skin and sunken eyes, shaped by dozens of missions and countless days and nights in the maze of the underground. He looked like someone who had witnessed too much and still couldn't bear to witness one more thing. His gaze softened for a moment, betraying a worry that even experience could no longer contain.

"God... I don't agree with this," he muttered softly, more to himself than to those nearby. "They're too young. They shouldn't be going up there alone."

No one contradicted him.

But no one intervened. The mission would proceed. No questions. No delay.

Harvey stood still, eyes fixed on the heavy sealed door of corroded metal. Rust had spread across its surface like a disease, and the bolts looked fused into the frame. That was the limit. The boundary. Beyond it, no longer the underground. No longer control. No more rules.

Beyond was the city. Or what remained of it.

And maybe something else would remain of him too, once he'd crossed that threshold.

Another soldier approached. A veteran with slouched shoulders and a face weathered by dust and time. His expression was soft, not encouraging but understanding. He gave a brief smile.

Not wide. Not reassuring. Just a quiet gesture that said he understood. That he'd been there too. He winked, and spoke in a dry, resigned voice:

"You'll be alright, lads. Don't mind him. He's just trying to keep you grounded. You didn't get this far for nothing. You're ready. Give it all you've got. Good luck..."

Neither of them answered. Just a short nod. A stiff motion, dulled by masks and the pressure of the vest on their chests.

The sealed door began to give. Not abruptly. Not noisily. Just with a heavy resistance, as if every inch conceded was a decision forced into being. The metal groaned, a sound like dry steel surrendering. Like an old jaw unclenching, opening up to spit out two figures into another world.

A wave of stale, heavy air rolled out from the gap. A stench of old rot, mixed with dust, rubble, and something unidentifiable, pushing through the filters only halfway. The rest, the part no filter could block, settled deeper. In the mind. In the gut. In that lingering sense that never left the body.

The torch beams reached ahead but claimed nothing. They only edged the frozen haze, never breaking it. Shadows snapped short, flickering bands danced across cold walls. It was a dry December evening, but brutal. The air bit through every opening. The darkness wasn't just absence of light. It was a presence, old, compact, untouched for far too long. Not night. The complete absence of life.

The city wasn't waiting. Not as a witness. Not as an enemy. But as a blind thing, voiceless, faceless.

Harvey took a deep breath, a reflex, useless. The mask let nothing real through, but the gesture mattered. That human act, proving he was still alive. Not yet turned fully into function.

His companion's shoulder twitched slightly. But he didn't step back.

Then the storm hit, brutal and wordless, without warning. Before them stretched the abandoned docks near West India Quay: twisted stacks of containers, shattered glass, the remains of overhead walkways. Beyond, the fractured outline of One Canada Square rose like a burnt rib, bored through by wind and time. The snowflakes were heavy, packed with ice and dust, striking their visors with a force that felt alive. Personal. The wind screamed through the ruins, stripping away layers of clothing, cutting through to the bone. Everything was dirty white, grey, scattered. Not a scene. A moving hallucination.

Harvey looked ahead. Not searching for landmarks. There weren't any.

It was all movement. Roar. Cold chaos.

"We need to get on with it," he said, slowly, deliberately.

The wind swallowed his voice, but his companion's eyes moved behind the fogged visor. He'd heard.

They went on. No questions. No promises. Through a city with no face.

Only teeth.

The hostile environment left no room for hesitation. The storm, the cold, the ruins, all demanded decision. Direction. A resolve that couldn't be faked. No stop was neutral. Every second lost was a step towards death. They moved forward slow but steady. Each step weighed between instinct and a reality that whispered, with an icy voice, that turning back would be safer. But there was no 'back' anymore.

His companion's back trembled. Not from the cold. From something deeper. Regret. Doubt. Maybe even shame.

In front of that broken landscape, everything lived down in the Tube, the drills, the tests, the fatigue, suddenly felt absurd. A cruel joke spoken by someone who'd never seen the world above. Maybe it would've been easier to fall back there, among the instructors, than to be sent here. Among ghosts.

The streets, if that word still applied, were buried under rotten timber, twisted cables, fragments of life turned into meaningless things. The wind, sharp with ice, chased through the ruins in a long, constant howl, crashing into buildings and bouncing back as scattered echoes.

Slanted walls, shattered windows, collapsed roofs, everything seemed to balance on illusion. As if one strong gust would bring the whole thing down for good.

The cars, what was left of them, stood like rusted corpses. Gutted interiors. Missing wheels. Metal frames shaped by pain. Deep craters tore through the asphalt, exposing filthy layers of earth, like the world was trying to pull everything back down. A land devouring its own bones.

And still, anomalies. Cars parked neatly. Buildings with intact façades. Windows untouched by dust or vandalism. Shapes that, from a certain angle, mimicked normality. Ignore the rust, and the traffic light might blink. A car engine might start. But the silence, absolute and cold, killed any illusion.

A thin film of ice coated what trees remained. Not beautiful. Just solemn. Like cold marble laid over a forgotten graveyard. A posthumous gloss.

Harvey stopped. Just for a second. Looked up. He knew this area. On the pavement to the right, years ago, his mother had held his hand tightly. She'd shown him a colourful panel with animals. He'd laughed, clinging to her fingers. The world had been alive.

Now there was nothing. No panel. No laughter. No hand.

Just the street. The wind. Him.

The memory didn't warm him. But it didn't cut either. It was part of this landscape now. A layer beneath the snow. A relic with no witness.

It was only the second time in five years they'd come up. But not as observers. As enforcers. This wasn't a test. It was punishment.

The city, once frantic with life, was now a cold ruin. A monument frozen in snow and forgetfulness. Cracked pavements. Bent signs. Crumbling buildings. Not just the marks of war. The marks of man.

Harvey didn't feel fear. Not in the usual sense. But he felt something else. The weight of loss. The pressure of time. Mistakes set deep in the walls. This world had nothing left to give. Only guilt. And ruins.

And still, they didn't stop.

The station was too far. Turning back, impossible. Not because they couldn't make it. But because it would mean failure. A wound that wouldn't close. There was only one way forward. And they had to follow it to the end.

Harvey muttered as he moved through the wind biting at his legs through the seams, "Incredible... how something made by man can destroy everything in a single moment."

His voice was muffled by the mask, but his companion heard. He didn't reply. Just nodded, faintly. In his wet eyes, there was no fear left. Only a quiet understanding. Bitter. No training could ever teach it.

The wind picked up. It wasn't air anymore. It was pressure. The blizzard tore at their footing, ripped at their balance. The cold wasn't sharp now. It was dull pain, deep, spreading through clothes and flesh, settling in the joints like an old infection. The mask systems trembled faintly, signs they were starting to strain. Every breath had become an act of will. The air came through the filters like needles, thin, cold, never enough. It didn't kill. But it didn't quite keep them alive either. It let them carry on, just barely.

Harvey felt his hands go numb. He pulled them to his chest, then pushed forward again with measured steps. Not a run. Instinct. His companion followed, heavy and deliberate.

"We've got to stay sharp, Harvey," he muttered, breath tight, barely reaching past the filters. "I don't want to get caught off guard. Not by deforms, not by anything else. Not here. Not now."

Harvey didn't answer.

But the thought settled like a cold blade. Here, you're not allowed to make mistakes.

Everything was white. Undefined. A dead colour, stripped of memory. The world hadn't died. It had frozen. In a drawn-out sigh, unfinished. A sigh no one dared to thaw.

"Don't tell me you're scared now," Harvey said, with a trace of bitter irony, but the smile never reached his eyes. "You were the one who wanted to be a scout, right? If you want to go back... go back. I'm going on."

The words hung between them, in the frozen air, heavier than he'd meant. Not a challenge. Not surrender. A crack. A thought unspoken until now. The thought of being alone. And it scratched at him inside, slow but certain.

"I'm not going anywhere," the other said, without slowing. His back straightened in a reflex, like he was shifting the weight of the past. "It wasn't my dream to carry a gun? I'm not dropping it now."

It wasn't a speech. Not an excuse. Just a quiet statement, shaped by everything he'd seen. And it was enough.

Harvey said nothing. Just nodded once. He felt something release in his gut. He wasn't alone. Not yet.

The road continued.

Ruins upon ruins. Buildings fractured, broken into impossible angles. Concrete and twisted steel like teeth lodged in the mangled cityscape. Old craters, quiet, like mouths open to nothing. The streets had become a thick blend of rubble, torn metal, plaster, and fragments of a past that no longer held meaning.

Harvey clutched the map with such force it whitened his knuckles. If he lost it, everything would unravel. His companion walked beside him with his weapon raised, like an animal sniffing at shadows. His eyes flicked along building edges, into corners, into the dark. No step was random. No movement wasted.

The city was silent. A kind of silence that didn't promise calm. Only an ending.

Night had fallen completely, soundless. Like a heavy curtain dropped over an abandoned stage. The sky was gone. Only traces of the moon remained, torn by thick clouds, casting a sick, dirty light across the ruins. Shadows stretched over the asphalt like broken limbs. The buildings, once upright, solid, now stood like hollow shells, concrete corpses. The shattered windows stared out blankly. Unblinking. Just waiting.

The towers loomed over nothing. Standing there like blind witnesses, with no purpose. Only presence. No hope.

The ground was a brittle crust of ice, dust, concrete. Each step came with a doubt. Iron jutted from the soil like long, cold, indifferent fangs. Cars, overturned, rusted, coated in a pale film, were unmarked graves. Dead forms of life.

The wind didn't blow. It slashed. It shoved shadows forward and back, making them leap across walls like warnings. The air smelled of old damp, oxidised metal, fallen plaster. The scent of ruins.

From deep somewhere, a snap. Short. Brutal. Like a joint giving way. Then another. A dull echo, fading. Like a building dropping to its knees too late to matter.

Nothing moved.

But everything pulsed.

In this world that had forgotten light, every step was a deal with death. It wasn't just alertness. It was instinct. Reflex. A constant tension: stiff shoulders, flexed ankles, wide eyes that didn't blink. Every shadow could lie. And every lie could kill.

Harvey and his companion knew the rule. Guards didn't go up. Not outside. And certainly not at night. Because night wasn't just the absence of light. It was something else. The air, saturated with cold and silence, carried a heavy vibration, almost organic, as if the city wasn't asleep but awake, listening. And if it was listening, then it might, at any moment, respond. That response never had a human voice.

Ahead, about a hundred and fifty yards away, the building rose from a deep fissure in the asphalt, near what had once been the corner of Canada Square and Upper Bank Street. It jutted out like a broken rib from the corpse of the city. A vertical gash in the orderly ruin of the financial district. It hadn't been built to survive a collapse, yet it remained, defiant, its facade shattered, but still standing. Like a blind witness, unable to forget, refusing to fall with the rest.

Harvey recognised it at once. In the trampled dust before the entrance, where once people crossed toward Crossrail Place, a fallen sign still bore the faded letters "HSBC", corroded by time, saltwater, and acidic winds. Once, they had stood there on Canada Place as symbols of stability forged in contracts and profit margins. Now it was just a ruin, but one with a recognisable shape. It no longer protected anything. It merely hinted that once, it had been a fixed point on the map of a world that thought it could calculate the future. Now, left alone between twisted bridges and the shattered glass of the Jubilee Line, it was more relic than building. More absence than shelter.

The cracked walls rose above them not with grandeur, but with silent stubbornness. The foundations still held. In a landscape of dust and torn steel, that was enough.

Not a word had been spoken. Just a look. The masks covered their faces, but the eyes said what needed to be said. It wasn't courage. It wasn't pride. It was acceptance. They knew what was coming. The first point of the mission. The first edge of the unknown.

A long, drawn-out gust passed through the ruin, like a sigh from another world. Rusted metal creaked imperceptibly, shivering. A warning. Or perhaps just the city, shifting in its sleep.

As they drew nearer, the sense of unreality thickened. Heavier. The city seemed to breathe a different air. Not just foul. Hostile. Air that wasn't made for people. Each step cracked the thin layer of snow with a dry, crisp sound, but in that absolute silence, it felt like a scream.

The mission, coldly outlined on paper, now carried the weight of a life. Or a death. They walked together. Without speaking. Without needing words. Between them, silence was already a pact.

In the heart of the ruins, they had found what the world had lost long before: direction. Not hope. Not trust. Just the act of going forward.

"Here," Harvey whispered, pointing at the entrance.

The door, once brushed steel, was now a rusted slab, jammed in its frame. When they forced it open, the wet, drawn-out screech scratched at their ears, not like a mere opening, but a tear. Instinctively, both gripped their weapons tighter against their chests.

The darkness inside was thick. Not just an absence of light, but a substance in itself. Dense, smothering, scentless, silent. A space that did not want to be inhabited.

They stepped into a long, narrow corridor, like a throat that had already swallowed too much. On either side, doors hung at odd angles, torn loose or smashed. The ones still holding were stained with dark marks, set into the wood or metal. Blood. Dried. Silent. Without scream.

The building hadn't been abandoned. It had been left in a rush. Like a body collapsing before it could say anything. Everything remained exactly as it had been in the moment of collapse, disordered, unfinished. Only the money had vanished slowly, taken by time, by hurried hands, by the hunger of years.

Every step was a decision. Every breath, a pact with the space around them. Whatever could follow was already here. Either hidden. Or approaching.

But in a quiet way, Harvey knew beyond the mission, beyond the objective, beyond every order given, that place would leave a mark. Or take one.

They kept going. Not because they weren't afraid. But precisely because they were. And in that world, fear wasn't a barrier. It was fuel.

The air grew heavier with each step. Cold, viscous, thick with a sour scent, familiar, yet inhuman: old blood, deep-set rust, ancient mould embedded in the walls. A smell not from the surface, but from beneath things. From the layers of time.

They advanced slowly, tightly focused, their movements compact, breath short and filtered by masks. Sounds came through distorted, mechanical, like their thoughts passed through a broken device before they could truly feel them.

The walls, once clad in white laminated plastic and frosted glass, were now stained, cracked in places, marked with dark traces and erratic signs drawn in some hardened, brown substance. Trembling symbols, impossible to decipher, like markings left in haste by someone who had no time to finish what they'd begun. Dust had settled on everything, on the matte granite floor, on the steel railings, along the edges of the suspended ceiling, like dead skin over a space that belonged to no one.

The beams from their torches cut through the darkness, but didn't conquer it. They merely pushed it back a few steps, enough to allow them forward. Their shadows twisted along the walls, snaking around corners, warped, elongated, like creatures refusing to die.

Every footstep struck like a blow. The granite creaked beneath their combat boots, amplified by the dense silence. The corridor seemed to narrow, to press in. Not physically. Mentally. It was a pressure chamber, invisible, testing their hearts with every step.

They passed what must once have been a conference room. The metal door hung crooked on a single hinge, twisted at an unnatural angle, its handles blackened and bent by soot. Harvey glanced inside. The glass tables had been shattered. Chairs overturned, their legs broken. Shards scattered across the granite floor. On the laminated walls, smears of blood, rising in irregular streaks up to the suspended ceiling. Nothing functional remained. No object left whole. Everything hinted at a sudden clash, silent, violent, witnessed by no one. Survived by none.

They didn't stop. There was no time for questions. No room for pity. The fear was there, but each step crushed it under their boots.

A sound. Brief. Quiet. A rustle. Just enough to throw them off rhythm. Weapons up, eyes fixed. Just a rat. Wet fur, bristled, eyes too large, too alive. It slipped past like a shadow and vanished into a crack in the wall.

Nothing dangerous. Not yet.

But the silence was no longer the same. The darkness now felt thick, animated. It held something inside, something that waited. Patient. Unhurried.

The corridor stretched on, as if it had no end. And it grew heavier. Not in distance. In weight. Each step seemed to press down on their chests. Like a sentence.

Then the smell. It had made it through the filter, faint, but there. A stain that couldn't be washed away. Harvey wore the gas mask, tightly secured, seals checked, but some smells always found their way through. There was a sweetness, rotten, mixed with damp and rust. Hard to name, yet unmistakable to anyone who'd spent enough time in the tunnels: the sign that something had died. Or that something worse had passed through.

Slowly, his breath grew quicker, fogging the visor. It wasn't panic. It was memory. The body remembered what that smell meant. What kind of places carried it. What kind of things left it behind.

And up ahead, like a mute confirmation, the door at the end of the corridor. Heavy. Reinforced iron. Hinges bent from age and moisture. Cracked near the bottom, where the structure had given way under unknown pressure. Half open. Not a sign of safety, but a missed warning. As if someone had fled. Or entered. Or worse, opened it for someone else. The smell came from beyond. Or had passed through. But it hadn't left.

The surface was scratched. Deeply. Long, irregular cuts. Not from a tool. From claws. Or from desperation. Some were carved deep. Others trembled, repeated lines like tired fingernails. Testimonies. From moments that had no name.

Harvey stopped. Looked. And knew. It was no longer suspicion. Something beyond was breathing. Or waiting.

He adjusted his torch. The beam sliced the dark like a blade.

They pushed the door. Slowly. The metal groaned, a sound like pain. The room beyond was colder. Denser. But it wasn't silence. It was absence. A silence packed with weight.

Their breaths matched. Not out of calm. Out of fear. Pure fear. Controlled, but real. Not shaking. But unrelenting.

"Right-hand corridor," Harvey said. His voice was low, steady. "Map says that's where the rucksack is."

He raised the crumpled plan. His hand trembled slightly. But not his voice.

"Then let's grab it and get the hell out of here," hissed his companion.

No tone. No joke. Just intent.

No one laughed. No one even smiled.

They simply kept moving. No turning back.

They advanced in silence. Slow, calculated steps, as if the floor might give way. Eyes wide, blurred by the mist inside their visors, fingers clenched around the trigger, just as they'd been taught. The corridor, once wide, now felt like it was closing in, yard by yard. The walls were damper, colder, closer. They were near the point marked on the map. The pack.

But that's not what stopped them.

A sound. Guttural. Brief. Choked. No echo, but weighty. Like a sigh torn from a scorched chest. Not human. Not animal. Somewhere in between.

They flattened to the wall. Their coats touched the mould spread across it like a disease. Their breathing grew ragged, uneven, torn by the filters. Their hands, slick with sweat, could no longer hold with certainty. The fear seeped through their gear, into skin, then through skin, into nerves, into marrow.

The faint light in the corridor didn't flicker from electricity. There was no current. The only source was Harvey's torch and his companion's beam behind. Yet the shadows moved, trembling, as if the walls themselves were breathing slowly, expanding the outlines. They didn't follow the logic of bodies. Some shadows appeared without a source. Others stretched at impossible angles, like visual echoes from a reality no longer bound by known rules. Or one still ruled, by something older. Deeper.

Harvey was closest to the corner. And he knew. There was no room left for hesitation. Yet all his body did was hesitate. Trembling gently, continuously, from knee to shoulder. He closed his eyes for a second, to break the thought. When he opened them again, his fingers began to move. Obedient. Not brave. Automatic.

His companion had raised a hand. Tried to stop him. To ask him to wait. To breathe. But it was too late. Harvey's head torch had cast a splash of light against the wall. A signal. A warning. A threat. In another world, it would have been a flag. Here, it was a sentence.

The other man's voice never came. Just a soft hiss, lost in the thick air. Like a prayer without a god.

Harvey stepped forward. Slowly. Firmly. He pressed against the edge of the corner, then raised his head and glanced.

And time collapsed into a single beat. One heartbeat, stretched, caught beneath the ribs, frozen.

In the beam of the torch, it crouched. Not a man. Not an animal. Not even a mix.

A deform.

Its skin, black and glossy, looked like a greasy film stretched over a muscular frame. Reflections moved the wrong way, as if the body ignored geometry. There was no symmetry, no coherence. Limbs twisted at impossible angles, each joint holding a latent, violent strength. The claws, long, curved, like blades, didn't hang. They waited.

The head, too large or too small for the body, lacked visual balance. Just intent, a vector of existence. The neck didn't move, but it was clear it knew. It knew it was being watched.

The breathing, that was everything. A deep, irregular rasp, forced out, as if air was being rejected by the body, yet pushed forward by a will no longer bound to life. A sound soaked in fluid, seeping from it like fever. It echoed not just through ceiling and walls, but in Harvey's throat, in his companion's ribs, in their lungs, in their temples.

Harvey didn't move. He couldn't. There was nothing to say, no room for plans, or for orders. Just the stare, just the moment, possibly the last.

He froze. His body refused command. There was no time for thought, no time for decision. Only his gaze still functioned, fixed, anchored to the horror before him. He didn't blink, didn't dare. Instinct told him that any movement, no matter how slight, could be enough. Enough to end it.

The air contracted. Not in his lungs, but around him. The space had turned into something viscous, thick, weighted with a tension that didn't come from them. It came from elsewhere, from another logic. Reality itself began to tear apart, like a thin membrane ripped by an old, crude force. What stood before him wasn't a creature, it was an idea, a nightmare given form.

Everything he thought he knew about the deforms, the stories, the warnings, the whispered fireside descriptions, suddenly felt useless. That thing he thought he understood was coming undone, breaking away from reality. It wasn't a legend, it wasn't a myth, it was here, real, alive, waiting.

It crouched, hunched, in a posture that looked protective, or preparatory. Beside it, the rucksack. An absurd contrast. A banal object, a piece of kit, their entire mission reduced to a few stones. And between it and that object stretched hell itself.

The deform's eyes, bulging, wet, reflected the torchlight the wrong way, almost provocatively. It wasn't just soulless, it was the total absence of any recognisable intent. It was a void, staring. The deep, guttural, sick breath came not as sound, but as vibration. It

travelled through walls, floor, their temples, slipped beneath the skin and stirred something beyond fear.

Harvey stepped back, slowly. Every inch a pact, not with himself, with the place, with the creature, with death. The lights didn't flicker, but his eyes did. His head turned slightly, the torch moved, a brief flash of light, unintentional. Too fast. He hoped it hadn't been seen or understood.

His heart pounded like an engine out of rhythm. Pulses overlapped, the sound of his own blood blocked out thought. His throat was dry, lips numb. His hand on the weapon trembled slightly. He didn't want to shoot. Not yet. Not unless he had to.

He pressed himself against the wall, cold, damp, like an old wound. But it was real, and that mattered. He needed something real, something other than what he had just seen.

He closed his eyes, just for a second. Not to pray, not in surrender, just to breathe, once more, with control.

The realisation that everything hung on a single wrong move struck like a verdict. Harvey hung suspended between instinct and thought. Survival was no longer a strategy, it was a test. Now, here, every breath, every movement, every fibre of fabric that might rub and make a sound.

Their mission, that rucksack, had become a silent wager. Not between them and the enemy, but between life and what remains when it ends. It wasn't even about courage, it was about the absence of choice.

He backed away, slowly. Small movements, precise, without hesitation, almost invisible, as if the motions had been drawn in the air beforehand. In his mind, the instructor's voice was vague, an echo: don't move unless you know you have to. But even that voice seemed unsure now.

He spotted his companion, pressed to the wall, a fixed, dark shadow, trembling, controlled, just as he was. They looked at each other, understood each other, without words, without signs. Just that look it's real, it's here, and it's alive.

Reaching him, Harvey lowered his head near his companion's shoulder and whispered quietly, barely audible, as if the air itself might carry the words too far.

"It's... it's a deform. Just like they said. Only worse."

He stopped, swallowed, forced his voice not to shake.

"If we mess up... if we make one wrong move... there's no coming back."

His companion's shoulder didn't twitch. He remained motionless, locked in place. Then, without turning, without any wasted gesture, he replied. The tone was harsh, short, with no hint of reassurance, no false comfort.

"We won't."

That was it. That's all they had.

"Harvey, we've been through too much to break now. We know what we're doing. We're trained. We've got weapons. We've got rounds. If it goes sideways, we shoot without hesitation. But first, we fool it."

The voice was cold, forged in metal. Not courage, but clarity. Not promise, but strategy.

Harvey gave a short nod. No words were needed. There were no more commands between them. Only a silent pact, born of mutual recognition. A direct confrontation meant death. If they had a chance, it was now. In silence. In shadow.

They began to move. Slowly. Millimetre by millimetre. Every motion was a full manoeuvre. The torches were lowered. Their movements swallowed by darkness. Their boots touched the floor with precision. Breathing through the masks was almost painful, taken in turns, measured, like injections of ice. They moved along the wall, synchronised without speaking.

They were close now. The rucksack was there. And beside it, the creature.

Harvey raised a hand. He was preparing to grab the strap.

Then the deform turned its head.

No warning. No preceding sound. Just a movement torn from any known biology. Sudden. Irregular. The disproportionate head twisted towards them. The bulging eyes locked on them with an intensity that erased all distance. A visual guillotine.

A deep growl, saturated with fluid and vibration, filled the corridor. It didn't echo. It was as if the walls absorbed it. It knew. It had known all along.

The decision was no longer made. It tore itself out of them like a reflex explosion. No order. No plan. Just reaction.

The weapons came up in a fraction of a second. Automatic fire. Short. Directed. Bullets ricocheted off the walls. The lights flickered. Concrete trembled. The room seemed to move with the noise.

Hits landed. Flesh burst. The oily skin tore in glossy strips. But the deform didn't fall. It didn't scream. It let out a broken, rasping, guttural sound, like a beast pulled out of a broken incubator. And it advanced. The claws sliced the air. Its body partially came apart, but each step was faster. More determined.

There was no time for panic. Only for firing. Then firing again.

Harvey felt the recoil in his shoulders, in his elbows, in his chest. Each bullet left like a part of himself. Like a promise thrown back. His companion beside him kept firing without pause. Rhythmic. Controlled. Precise. With the cold desperation of someone who knows they've reached the end of the line.

The creature came forward. Thick, black blood spurted from its ribs. Strips of flesh were torn off, but they didn't stop it. It didn't slow down. The force didn't drop. This wasn't life. It was will.

Each second became a rope stretched between worlds. They both knew, if it reached them, if it crossed that last threshold, nothing would remain.

And then Harvey looked at it. For a moment. And he saw. In those bulging eyes, beyond the blood, beyond the instinct, there was rage. Deep hatred. Born, not gathered. It didn't just want to kill. It wanted to erase. To reduce everything human to nothing.

And Harvey understood this was no longer about the mission.

It was about not giving in. About firing until the very end. Even when the end no longer existed.

And his hands kept firing.

The deform staggered. No sound. No final attack. No desperation. It collapsed heavily, with a weight that was not physical, but symbolic. Like a broken doll. Like a structure crumbling under its own absurdity. Flesh and bone shattering under the pressure of a life that had rejected form. It stayed there, inert, but with a residual twitch, as if the space itself didn't want to let it die.

And then time shattered.

It was no longer possible to tell whether seconds or minutes had passed. Silence stretched over the corridor like a heavy, damp cloth. Only their ragged, uneven breaths still filled the air. They bounced off the walls. Returned. Fainter each time.

Harvey lowered his weapon slowly. His companion did the same. But their eyes, their eyes never left the deform. In this world, death never came just once. It had to be waited for. Checked. Confirmed.

They moved closer. Wide steps, but slow. Opposite flanks. Circling. Fingers still on the trigger. Their bodies trained not to trust silence.

The body didn't move. Didn't breathe. It was just torn flesh, shattered bone, and thick, dark blood spreading slowly into the cracks of the floor, pulled down by gravity and oblivion. The oily sheen was gone. Only inert matter remained.

"It's dead," said his companion, voice short, shaken, but cut clean, like a line through fog. A sentence with no echo, no hope.

Harvey didn't answer. He couldn't. He just nodded. Slowly. Heavily. The adrenaline drained from him, leaving not peace, but a dense void, sticky, like cold mud under the skin. His mind refused calm. His pulse pounded in his temples like a bell struck too late. His body no longer moved with precision. But it still moved.

They recovered the rucksack. The object. The mission. A few inches of canvas, heavy as a verdict. They took it without ceremony, without needless caution. What had to be faced had been faced. What had to be seen had been seen.

They said nothing more. There was nothing to say. Not yet. Not even their eyes asked anything anymore. Just direction. The exit. The station. Back.

No victory. No glory. No relief. Only return.

They left the building in silence. Passing the deform as if passing a grave. No glance back. Not one. In this world, what's left behind stays behind. And what you take with you, you never put down again.

And still, they knew.

When they made it back to the station, when the cold lights of the refuge covered them once more, when they passed through the sealed gate and laid the rucksack on the table, they already knew no one would understand.

Because they hadn't brought back just a bag. Not just the objective.

But the proof that what haunted the dark beyond, whispered about by firelight and stitched into broken dreams, was no legend.

The deforms didn't wait. Didn't hunt. They weren't part of the night.

They were the night.

And now, the night had a face.

The city welcomed them with its sharp cold, with wind that didn't whistle, but struck. Like a blade. The storm had thickened, and the flakes, heavy, wet, nailed into the air, had turned into white needles, sharp, piercing through gear and reaching the flesh. Each step was a negotiation. Not just with the weather. With exhaustion. With the fear still pulsing in the corner of the eye. With everything that could not be said.

They walked. Without asking why. Shoulder to shoulder, two silhouettes among ruins. They didn't speak. There was nothing left to say. Between collapsed buildings, covered by the thick silence of snow, in a city that had forgotten what life meant, they moved forward simply because stopping was no longer an option.

Only the wind kept them company. And absence.

Beneath the heavy layers of fatigue, something remained. Not hope. Not courage. But a quiet pride. Of those who hadn't been crushed. Not victors. Not heroes. Just witnesses who could still walk.

With the rucksacks tightly strapped, with their steps stretched mechanically, they moved forward without thought. Walking had become reflex. Hollow rhythm. Survival, routine. They could no longer even feel their hands.

Ahead, a grey shape began to take form through the blizzard. It wasn't an entrance, but a wound in the cold concrete of forgotten London. The sealed door, hollowed deep under Greenwich Peninsula, rose from the snow like a memory forced to the surface.

North Greenwich. No longer a station. A threshold between the sterile ruins of the O2 Arena and the dead corridors of the Jubilee Line, a mile from the waters of the Thames.

A knot of cables, broken pipes and damp concrete. Above, fallen glass, hollow structures. Below, silence. Shelter. And fear.

Home. Or what "home" could mean for those who had met death beyond the walls.

The storm clawed at their cheeks. Their knees trembled. But they didn't stop.

A guard saw them. A shout. Then others. The door began to open slowly, with a deep, metallic groan, like an old wound being reopened. From the darkness of the station spilled a pale light, yellow, cold, but alive.

They stepped into the underground again. Onto solid ground. Into a space that didn't welcome them with open arms, but with damp walls and the scent of bodies. But it was safe. It was sealed. It was something other than the outside.

They didn't look like victors. Not even like survivors. Just two shadows that had somehow, against odds written in blood, returned.

Applause didn't erupt. It broke. Cut short. Uncertain. More a sign of recognition than celebration. Palpable, but hollow. Like trembling hands stretched across an abyss.

Harvey heard it as through a thick wall. He stopped. Set down the rucksack. Removed his mask. The underground air struck his chest, heavy, humid, familiar.

"We made it, Adrian," he said. His voice came out cracked, like after a sprint to the edge of the world.

"We're back."

Adrian was there. Beside him. Dirty, exhausted, but alive. Still standing.

For a moment, just a moment, North Greenwich was no longer a station on the map. No longer concrete, air filters, and tired bulbs.

It was the place where someone had actually returned.

It was what remained.

Everything.