Chapter 1: When the Air Raid Siren Screamed

Harvey Hunter woke with difficulty that morning, 14 October 2013. The wind lashed blindly through the bare branches in the courtyard. Rain beat against the windows like a summons. Heavy. Cold. Repetitive. A sound that seemed to come from beyond time, beyond night.

He rose slowly. His body was still caught in the layers of leftover sleep, but the cold in the flat shook him awake without ceremony. He stepped to the window and rested his forehead against the wet glass. The city was just a blurred silhouette, a mass of shadows and rain-drenched buildings. The sky hung low, uniform and solid, like a lid of lead. Nothing moved. There was no promise in that dead, diffuse light.

The rain washed everything but cleansed nothing.

He left the room, barefoot on the cold floor, and made his way to the kitchen.

"Morning," he muttered without conviction.

"Did you sleep well?" his mother’s voice came from the other room, mingling with the faint, dying hiss of a kettle.

"Not the best. Rain woke me a couple of times."

His father was already at the table, nursing a mug of tea.

"You coming with me today, Harvey? Your brother too?"

Alex was already at the table, wrapped in a thick jumper, eyes fixed on nothing.

"Don’t know. He doesn’t really want to," Harvey said, avoiding his gaze.

"Mum, are you coming with us today?" Alex asked.

"I can’t today, darling," she replied in a neutral tone. "I've things to finish."

Alex said nothing. Just gripped the edge of the table with cold fingers.

"I’ll go then. But I want to know we’re coming back."

Their father didn’t answer at first. His face tensed, just a flicker around the mouth, the eyes. Then:

"Don’t talk nonsense, Alex. We’re not in one of those stories about warriors. Just a regular trip on the Tube, unless something’s changed."

The father’s tone was flat, but something behind it trembled.

Harvey caught it.

Harvey looked at his brother. The boy’s eyes were too serious for his age. Too quiet.

"We’ll be careful," Harvey said flatly.

Their father looked at them both, jaw tight, then asked:

"You know the rules."

"Yeah, Dad. Everything you said."

The younger boy, almost instinctively, reached for his father’s hand.

"I’ll hold your hand the whole time," he whispered, like a strange kind of promise.

"If you're going to do that, make sure it's not while I'm driving the train," the father replied, without a smile.

It wasn’t a moment for smiling.

No one spoke for a moment. The only sound was the rain and the soft tick of the kitchen clock.

"Have you heard the news, John?" the mother asked, her voice fading slightly under the steady noise of rain.

"About the alliance?" John answered, without looking at her. He masked his unease, but there was something forced in his tone, as if playing a part.

"Yes. It’s worse than it seemed. International relations have collapsed quietly. And once they collapse... they don’t come back."

Harvey frowned. He didn’t understand all of it, but there was no trace of exaggeration in her voice. Just that seriousness learned in silence, listening to the radio.

Alex stopped eating. The question escaped his lips, simple, cold:

"Does that mean war?"

The father didn’t answer straight away. He stared into his cup of tea as if it held a private abyss, then finally looked up.

"Not yet. But it’s the start of something worse. People have stopped cooperating. And when that happens... collapse follows. Everyone on their own."

Harvey shifted in his seat, eyes still on his father.

"And if it does happen, will it reach here?"

"The world’s small, Harvey. Smaller than it seems. What begins in places we don’t care about... hits us just when we care too late."

Silence.

His father was watching him, not harshly, but with something unreadable in his eyes.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Harvey asked, his voice barely audible.

"Because I'm afraid of what I won't be able to do. That I won't be able to protect anything. That those without weapons, money, a way out... they'll be the first to fall. That's what scares me."

"It's like a nightmare."

"It's not a nightmare, Alex. It's reality, coming slowly. And it doesn't knock."

The silence settled like a heavy blanket.

"As long as we're together..." the father said, though his tone was hollow. Not a promise, just a temporary shelter.

Harvey nodded.

"Yeah... together."

Alex whispered the same word, but without strength.

Their mother looked at them both. Her face tried to seem calm. But her eyes, dark and tired, betrayed something else.

"Alright. Eat. Let's get ready. What's coming... we deal with it together."

"Together," they echoed.

But something had slipped between their voices, a crack.

And no one could mend it anymore.

Their father watched in silence. The boys were finishing their breakfast with hurried, restless gestures, still carrying on their faces that faint trace of childish excitement which now felt increasingly out of place in a world closing in from every side. He drew breath slowly, with the quiet discretion of someone who couldn't afford to appear weak. Behind those composed eyes, his thoughts gnawed at him like rust in an old beam.

In their eyes, he saw what he'd lost long ago. Trust. Naivety. The belief that tomorrow would come, no matter what.

Fear wasn't a reaction anymore. It was a constant. It gripped him with a near-mathematical precision, always present, never voiced. He couldn't tell them how thin the film had become between order and collapse. How easily everything they called "home" could snap.

He wanted to pull them out of all this. To build them a beautiful lie. But the words were gone. Only silence remained.

Harvey swallowed the last bite of bread without rushing. He didn't get up. A cold emptiness pressed against his stomach, but it wasn't hunger. He watched his mother's mechanical movements as she wiped down the counter and felt the need to touch her. It wasn't an impulse. It was the need to anchor something, to hold on to a reality slipping away.

"Mum..." His voice broke, short and heavy.

She turned. The smile on her lips was faint, curled into a corner of a mouth that no longer believed in smiling.

"Yes, Harvey?"

Harvey stood up, chair scraping softly against the floor.
Without replying, he embraced her. Tightly.
It wasn't tenderness. It was gravity. As if the whole world needed to be held still for just a moment.

She froze, startled. Then her hands rose slowly, hesitantly. She held him back. It wasn't the gesture of a mother. It was the gesture of a survivor.

She was trembling.

"What's this... for?"

Harvey stepped back gently. His eyes searched for something beyond her face.

"I'll find you. No matter what happens."

A heavy silence rose between them.

A cold shiver ran up her spine. It wasn't from the air in the kitchen. Nor from the chill outside. It was something else. The sense of an ending without a name.

"Harvey... what do you mean?"

But he didn't answer.

His gaze remained caught in the fogged window. Somewhere beyond the glass, the rain was falling without end.

"I don't know... I just felt I had to say it." He shook his head slightly, trying to bury something behind a forced smile, something he could no longer contain.

She stepped closer and touched her lips to his forehead.

"I'm here, Harvey. Always."

He nodded. But the feeling didn’t leave. It had settled inside him like a cold, greasy film, impossible to wash off. He pulled away slowly, took his coat from the hook, and joined the other two waiting by the door.

"You ready?"

His father’s voice sounded warm, but only to someone who didn’t know better. It was a mask. A necessary one. Like a gas mask, not for comfort, but for survival.

Harvey paused for a moment. He turned his head. Looked at her.

Long.

As if trying to imprint her face into memory. Permanently. A photograph that could never be forgotten. Not in dreams. Not in death.

"I love you, Mum."

"And I love you, Harvey. Now go. Stay close to your father. Look after your brother."

The door swung shut behind them, slow and soundless at first, then closing with a soft thud, swallowed by the stained walls of the block.
In the corridor, their footsteps echoed, uneven, measured, through the silence of a building that no longer had a voice.

Harvey paused, just for a second. He turned.

She was still there, framed in the doorway, one hand raised. Smiling.

But the smile didn’t reach her eyes.

They stepped out into the open. The streets were wet, dark, distorted by the rain’s reflections. Their feet struck the asphalt with a heavy, tired sound. The wind had lost all direction. It pushed from every side, a silent force that didn’t ask permission.

They walked in silence. Alex followed behind his father, Harvey further back, head down, caught in his own rhythm.

"You alright?" the father asked, not fully turning his head.

Harvey nodded. He gave a quick smile. But it was hollow, unfinished, like a half-forgotten outline.

"Yeah. I’m fine, Dad."

Nothing more.

His father looked at him for a moment, then raised his hand and placed it firmly on his shoulder. Heavy. Not a gesture of comfort. A sign. A reminder.

A gesture that, in that cold silence, could mean everything.

Or nothing.

"We'll get through it. Whatever happens. If we stick together... you remember what your mum said?"

Harvey nodded. But the word meant nothing. Beneath the soaked clothes, a faint tremor pulsed along his spine, not from cold, but from something undefined. The air had a different weight to it. A subtle heaviness, like before a storm that hadn't made a sound.

Taxis passed in greasy waves. Each car splashed through the dark puddles with the thick sound of heavy water. Headlights reflected on the wet road like dead eyes, and the sky, grey, dissolved, seemed to melt into the rain.

London wasn't crying. London was dissolving, quietly, with clenched teeth.

In the cab, the boys stared out of the window in silence. Their breath fogged the glass in small, rhythmic circles. Their father sat motionless. Hands locked in his lap. Eyes fixed on the passing streets.

The shadows of people looked brushed onto the pavement: black, shapeless, without destination. The buildings, once rust-red, now hunched beneath the rain. The misted windows reflected nothing. Only absence.

Everything moved, yet nothing seemed alive.

Each turn the taxi took deepened the silence. The father said nothing. But his thoughts were too heavy not to hang in the air.

Would they understand? What could he say without destroying what little they still had? What still protected them from what was coming? His words?

The taxi pulled up along the edge of Millennium Way, at the quiet end of a grey morning. The sky was flat and low, like a sheet of frosted glass stretched tight over the city. The natural light, dim and cold, blended with the fading glow of the streetlamps, slowly dissolving from the wet asphalt.

All around, the area was impeccably maintained. The glass facades of nearby buildings, offices, a just-opened café, polished shopfronts, reflected the clean lines of the raised walkways. Nothing was dirty. Nothing looked abandoned. Everything was intact, functional, almost inert.

In the distance, the dome of the O2 Arena rose, clean, cold, silent. The steel framework stretched flawlessly upward, and its white skin, perfectly taut, repelled the morning light with a diffuse, clinical gleam.

Few passers-by. Steady steps, maps in hand, tired faces, but unhurried.

Their father drew a deep breath before stepping out. No release. Just damp. He paid. Got out. Took both boys by the hand. No theatre in the gesture. Just reflex. But firm.

He walked towards the entrance to North Greenwich without looking back. Without hesitation. Without certainty.

They descended underground.

The station was full. Not of life. Of sound. Of pressure.

Footsteps. Shadows. Low voices. Laboured breathing. Suppressed sighs. A monotonous, industrial rumble in which people had become noise.

Harvey could feel his brother beside him, but everything beyond seemed to move with irregular speed, like a fast-forwarded film, badly rewound.

No points of reference. No time. Just the crowd. And that feeling that wouldn't go away.

They boarded the train. The carriage, though structurally identical to others, felt narrower. Not by design. By silence. A compact, stony silence that pressed the walls against the passengers, and the passengers against their own shadows. No conversation, no muffled laughter, no stifled sighs. Just the weak breath of the ventilation system, a mechanical exhale, cold, that warmed nothing. People sat hunched, eyes fixed on the floor, as if eye contact might open a crack. Their drawn faces carried the grey layer of chronic exhaustion, a dust of melancholy and fear, stuck to their skin, their eyelids, the corners of their mouths. Their hands, tucked in pockets or folded across knees, betrayed only one emotion: absence.

Standing, Harvey let himself sway gently with the motion of the train. His father and brother were two carriages behind. He had drifted from them unintentionally. Just a vague impulse, to shift perspective, to see something other than those same two familiar faces. He'd moved forward through the passengers with silent, almost ceremonial steps. No one looked at him. No one seemed to notice the space being crossed.

An old man clung to the side rail with one hand, stroking a torn leather bag with the other. A woman held her child tightly to her chest, eyes closed, lips moving in a silent prayer. Further down, a teenager in a hood leaned against the door, headphones hanging from his neck like two dead charms.
A young woman sat hunched over a dim phone screen, eyes locked, thumbs barely moving, as if the world beyond it no longer mattered.
No one spoke. No one moved more than necessary.

Harvey craned his neck, searching for his father. The rear carriage was still visible, but it felt impossibly far, not by distance, but by silence. He ran a hand across his wrist, over the old digital watch that still worked, a dated model, but reliable. The seconds ticked by. Patience did not.

A fogged window trembled slightly as the train passed through a pressure junction. The fluorescent lights flickered once. Maybe twice. Then, nothing.

Then the stop.

Not a braking halt, more like a collision. A jolt. A sudden screech of metal on rail that bit into the bones. Then silence. Heavy, dense, unnatural.

Harvey looked up. No one spoke. The air itself seemed to hesitate.

That’s when it came.

The sound.

The siren.

It didn’t come from inside. It tore down from above, a cold, alien rupture that didn’t belong underground. A scream that split concrete, sliced through flesh, and reached the nerves before it reached the brain. It slipped in under the skin like a thin blade.

Harvey flinched. He wasn’t the only one. The whole train seemed to shrink into itself for a moment, breath held, eyes locked.

It was the sound that wasn’t meant to be real. Meant to stay theoretical. Found only in old manuals, in training scenarios no one took seriously.
But now… it was alive.

The lights flickered. The ceiling tubes quivered in their mounts.

Inside, voices burst out in chaos. Not words. Just sounds. Murmurs. Questions without shape. Sudden movements. Cut-off breaths. The faces around him had twisted, they were no longer people, but outlines of panic, shadows with wide eyes.

A hand touched him. Harvey reacted instinctively, tensed like an animal caught between opposing fears. His fingers locked around the stranger’s wrist, but the contact vanished instantly, swallowed by the shifting mass. He wanted to stay anchored to something, to someone. But the gravity of fear was stronger than any bond. A silent, deep force, pulling in opposite directions, trying to tear apart what was still whole.

It wasn’t just an incident. It was the beginning of something. A threshold crossed. Invisible. Irreversible.

And Harvey could feel it. Without explanation. Without words.

"Harvey!" his father’s voice cut through the air like a crack in concrete.

But it was too late.

The crowd tore him from reality like a dirty, compact wave with no face. It took him, rolled him, threw him sideways. Hands broke apart in fractions of seconds. Alex was gone. His father was gone. The world had shattered into chaos.

No one was left.

The train had moved. Slowly, without warning. A deep tremor ran along the rails, and the lights inside the carriages faded gradually, leaving behind only the reflections of a civilisation slipping away. Harvey had been left on the platform, at London Bridge. Alone. He didn't yet understand how, but he'd known, in a single instant, that the doors wouldn't reopen. That the train wouldn't wait.

The station had turned into a choking organism. Thousands of footsteps overlapping, stomps mixed with screams, with sirens, with sounds without a source. The concrete vibrated beneath his feet. The air was thick, with dry dust, burnt fumes, sweat, and the unearthed scent of old panic.

Every movement became a battle. Not for progress, but for presence. Breathing was a privilege, swallowed by the thick air, broken into sharp fragments.

Harvey was searching. A face. A voice. A sign. Anything. But everything was fluid. A human stream. Bodies stripped of identity. People turned to mass.

He stumbled. Fell. Got back up. Without thought. Without logic. His heartbeat to a rhythm no longer his own. He wasn't running. He was being carried. Or he was fleeing. He no longer knew. Direction had become a cruel joke.

He reached a dark corner. It didn't matter where. Only that there, no one touched him. He dropped to the ground, palms pressed to the cold, dusty concrete. The flickering lights cast distorted silhouettes onto the walls. Not people. Just shadows. Reflections.

His breath came in jerks. No sob escaped. The crying was there, but silent. Fear had taken his voice. Stolen it.

He pressed his forehead to the cement. The dust clung to his skin, his lashes, his mouth. The bitter taste of panic, metallic, lingering.

He prayed.

He didn't know to whom. Or if it mattered. It wasn't prayer. It was despair rearranged into thought.

He closed his eyes. His mother. Her hands. Her voice. That faint smile, cut through with worry. That promise, spoken with half a mouth: "Stay close to your father. Look after your brother."

But nothing held to anything now.

The station kept shaking. Sirens pierced the plaster. The noise was constant. Brutal. Harvey stayed still, while people poured into the station amid screams and dread.

A child, curled in on himself, in a world distorting in real time. A world that no longer resembled anything he'd known.

Not even himself.

Twenty Years Later

The two messengers had left North Greenwich more than four hours ago. They had vanished from the customs officers' line of sight the moment the formalities were ticked off in silence, a dry check, devoid of ceremony, yet rooted in the same universal obsession with control. Their departure had been logged, their route predefined: a mile and a half of blind tunnel, along the old line towards Canary Wharf, out and back. The distance seemed modest. The route, straightforward. A mission classified as routine, a delivery task without complications, at least in theory. But the hours had passed. And the two had not returned.

The checkpoint, raised over cold tracks layered with the residue of another era, wasn't guarded by watchmen but by four armed men, each one coiled tight like a worn-out spring, fingers on the trigger not from discipline, but fear. Their uniforms hung on them like cloaks of exhaustion, faded, damp-soaked, yet still visible as symbols of authority. They weren't there merely to guard. They were there to stop. And stopping, in the underground, meant survival. They were the barrier between the station's unstable order and the living chaos that could erupt at any time from below.

The control post stood beneath a makeshift spotlight, an improvised beam that only worked when it wanted to. A weak, trembling light spilled into the thick, oily darkness, just enough to carve out a semblance of command. Where the light reached, control was still possible. Beyond that line, only the unknown.

Energy had become a privilege. The spotlight stuttered into life with difficulty, sometimes flickering nervously, sometimes dying altogether, like a heart on the verge of stopping. Neither weapons nor ammunition brought that visceral sense of safety. Only the light. Only that sharp beam capable of tearing through the dark before the dark could tear through flesh.

Acting under direct orders from the station manager, the soldiers on the platform, superior to the customs officers in the Tube's unwritten chain of command, enforced orders with cold precision. No one entered without clearance. No one exited without consequences. Patrols moved slowly, silently, eyes hollowed by sleeplessness and repetition. Order wasn't maintained through conviction, but through fear. And surveillance. What they were guarding wasn't freedom. It was the biological integrity of the station. Contamination, from above or below, meant the end.

The messengers disappearance hadn't yet been formally announced. Not yet. But the eyes of the four men at the checkpoint had begun to glance more frequently toward the black void of the tunnel. Glances that betrayed unease, not through panic, but through the deepening silence they sank into. In the underground, absence is an answer. And when the tunnel doesn't return what it was given, the silence itself becomes a verdict.

The customs officers scrutinised every figure approaching the station entrance. No one passed unchecked. No voice went undeciphered. Every face was examined at length, with that ritual suspicion that had become instinct. The process, on paper, routine, stretched into something slower, colder. First, the passport. Then the password. Being known wasn't enough. You had to be recognised, letter by letter, stamp by stamp, like a living document validated link by link. Every crossing required a reason. And every reason, a document issued, confirmed, and countersigned at point of origin.

If anything questionable turned up during the search, a hidden blade, a metal rod, a blunt shard of plastic, it was confiscated on the spot. No explanations. No warnings. No right of reply. The objects vanished into a locked room, guarded by silence and a mould-stained ledger with pages blotched by damp and old oil. Each entry was filled out by the customs officer on duty, a gaunt man with damp shadows under his eyes, who signed without blinking into a battered notebook strapped to his left thigh. Weapons were allowed only for those officially certified. And that certification, a yellowed sheet in duplicate, stamped and manually approved, came from the departure station's manager. Even then, no one travelled armed alone. A customs officer would accompany them, armed not with a gun, but with something heavier: mistrust.

Orders came from above, from the soldiers posted along the platform, and they weren't up for discussion. They weren't written in any manual, but they couldn't be ignored either. Beneath their weight lay a quiet humiliation. Toward the end of each shift, when the air grew thick and cold, and their knees ached from standing still, the customs officers began to feel something else. Not fatigue. Not fear. Resentment. They saw themselves as just as exposed as any soldier. Perhaps more so. No ranks, no leave, no honour. Just long hours of watch. And standing.

Their limbs pulsed rhythmically, palms raw from the cold steel. And when they stared into the tunnel's darkness, their thoughts slipped, involuntarily, to the station they called home, a cold room carved from concrete, a narrow bed, but one they knew. One they hadn't seen in nights.
In those moments, all ideals dissolved. Only routine remained. And that gleaming exhaustion that gnaws slowly but relentlessly, sharper than fear itself.

At North Greenwich, customs officers worked twelve-hour shifts. No real breaks. No retreat. Just the cold breath of the passage and the rigid routine of inspection. The soldiers on the platform, meanwhile, rotated every eight hours, a schedule that, though seemingly fair, only deepened the quiet bitterness festering in the officers' minds. That the platform soldiers were easily replaced, due to their limited numbers and lack of combat experience, was no comfort. Quite the opposite. The resentment ran silent, but deep.

The soldiers often held the platform's centre, where the lights were strongest and every gaze converged. In case of incident, the station manager relayed instructions quickly to the customs teams and the sentries at the sealed gate through these soldiers. The hierarchy was fluid only in appearance, in truth, orders flowed one way.

After a series of thefts and acts of sabotage, some minor, some violent, the soldiers were also tasked with guarding the pigs, solar transformers, and work platforms. They watched over food deliveries, monitored water tanks, escorted maintenance crews into restricted areas. They checked tools at the end of each shift. They were everywhere.

The constant patrolling passed the time, but didn't ease the fatigue. At night, customs officers remained still, like shadows, eyes fixed on the tunnels. Meanwhile, the platform soldiers chatted with the night shift workers, too long, too loud. These exchanges became a flashpoint. Supervisors filed complaint after complaint: that workers were distracted, efficiency dropping, discipline cracking, all because of the platform soldiers.

When exhaustion became unbearable, the officers would retreat to a low-ceilinged room wedged between two abandoned corridors. Others called it “the office”, a bitter joke. Inside, a gas lamp burned endlessly, its yellow light trembling against walls thick with mould. For those trying to sleep there, it was like being watched by something that never blinked. A foreign vigilance that kept you awake even as your eyes closed. No one admitted it, but all felt it. Every minute in that room added an invisible layer of discomfort. And dread.

The office was bare and utilitarian, no superfluous comfort. A folding metal chair, a low table blotched with oil, the ever-burning lamp, a rigged battery charger, a rusted coat rack, and a peeling wooden cabinet holding papers, ID tags, and the patrol ledger.

The customs officers mocked them in silence, with that bitter malice that only exhaustion can sharpen. They’d say that in the face of a deforms incursion, the platform soldiers would be the first to flee. That their weapons would be useless once chaos erupted. But the platform soldiers never responded. They didn’t laugh. They didn’t deny. They kept walking their rounds, fulfilling their duty with a quiet, resigned discipline. They felt no need to prove anything. Deep down, they believed time would show they could endure. That they wouldn’t break. That as long as they stood watch, North Greenwich would not fall.

For missions of critical importance, and to maintain links between stations, every key point in the underground system, including North Greenwich, had a specialised unit: a compact core made up of trained soldiers, messengers, and scouts. They didn’t report to platform officers. Nor to customs. Only to the station manager, the one authority that mattered in such situations.

The soldiers assigned as messengers wore no distinct uniforms, no visible signs of authority. Just a narrow strip of cloth stitched beneath the collar marked them apart. Their missions, rarely described in words, were among the most dangerous in the underground. They crossed the oldest, deepest, sometimes entirely abandoned tunnels to pass messages between stations. They weren’t bearers of news. They were living links in a fragile chain of communication.

Each messenger was given a fixed range: never beyond three stations from their origin point. This wasn’t a bureaucratic formality, it was a safeguard. In case of collapse, incursion, or blackout, it was the only way to keep key zones connected. The short distance meant a chance to survive. To return quickly. To make a decision that counted.

Surface deployment was another matter. Rare. So rare, in fact, that some messengers didn’t even consider it a real possibility. Only the station manager had the authority to approve such a mission, and even then, hesitation was the rule. The risks were many. The unknown, constant. The decision weighed heavily: not just the message’s importance, but the messenger’s physical condition, the surface layout at that time, reports of deformed activity, even the weather, up there, where no ordinary person dared to go.

Sometimes the manager would consult the full local military cell before sending anyone up. Other times, they decided alone, in silence. Going to the surface meant stepping into a space without rules. A form of calculated suicide.

For those missions, there were the scouts. More disciplined, more reserved. Trained to handle confrontation, but not to seek it. Their purpose was passage, not battle. They knew how to avoid danger, not chase it. The tunnels were their map, the surface, a toxic amnesia. Their

breath belonged underground. Each echo told them something, each change in temperature was a warning. Every footprint could mean life or death.

They never entered unknown zones. They didn't explore. They took no initiative. Every step was planned. Every mission, measured. And despite everything, they carried out their role with near-obsessive precision. They understood that in a fractured, isolated, fragile system, communication meant survival. And sometimes, a single message delivered in time could tip the balance in the face of disaster.

These soldiers were something else. Names whispered with respect, and fear. Not just for their courage, but for that instinctive skill in reading the fallen world: navigating without light, surviving where others were swallowed whole. They crossed vast territory, both underground and above, and always returned from places no one else would mention. Many zones no longer had names. Only the memory of a street, a rusted sign, a half-collapsed building. They went there.

They were few. And only some came back. But those who did brought back vital information, objects of value, sometimes even hope. On their routes, they encountered the deforms, creatures born of chaos and darkness, twice the size of a man, with shapes that defied any biological logic. Avoidance wasn't an option. Confrontation was a necessity. And only those trained to suppress fear survived.

Scouts brought what the entire underground system consumed without end, fuel, weapons, alcohol, batteries, cigarettes, books, clothes, medical kits, ammunition, tools. And money. Gold, silver, but above all: pound sterling. Even now, after two decades of darkness, British currency remained the supreme standard. The banknotes came from above, from collapsed banks, abandoned shopping centres, retail vaults buried under rubble. Cursed places, where a single misstep could mean death.

They didn't go there for glory. They went for that paper, faded faces, frayed corners. In the underground, the pound still held power. With it, you bought food, protection, a place in a safer station. The pound was more sought-after than weapons. More respected than orders. People would do anything for a stack. And often, they did. Just like before.

For those living in London's underground network, survival had become a kind of privilege. The city above, in ruins, soaked in radiation, crawling with the deforms, still, paradoxically, hid resources. Not endless. But enough to feed the hopes of those below. Station managers were expected to constantly assess the value of those resources, to calculate each risk, each mission, like a transaction. No opportunity was ignored. No cache of fuel or ammunition was dismissed.

In this sealed, hostile, competitive system, the ability to manage what came from above had become more important than combat itself. A poorly made decision could destabilise an entire section of the network. A badly distributed load could lead to revolt, hunger, or collapse. The leaders held no weapons. They held ledgers, maps, decisions.

Scouts were no longer seen as mere limbs sent into the unknown. In everyone's eyes, they had become something more. Explorers. Warriors. Yes. But also the backbone of a fragile economy, carried on the shoulders of the few who dared to go out, to take the risk, and return.

Each round trip was an investment. Each resource brought back, an act of balance. Without them, the communities would wither in isolation. With them, the underground still breathed.

And everything depended on this: a hand reaching into the dark. A step into the unknown. A man who, in spite of the darkness, kept walking.

Harvey Hunter sat still inside his suspended tent in North Greenwich, eyes fixed on the watch at his wrist. A Rolex Submariner No Date, its edges scored with fine scratches, its bezel dulled by time and silence. He had found it years ago, on a surface mission, in the ruins of a luxury shop in what had once been the financial district. The back was scratched, but it still worked. Still beat with merciless precision. A relic from a world that no longer existed.

Time was no longer a convention. It was a slow, cold adversary, one that never lost its patience. Harvey didn't look at it to tell the hour. He watched it like an anchor. Like a metallic echo of the past, ticking steadily through the flesh of the present. The second hand moved smoothly, without ticks, a gliding motion, silent, like the step of an unseen watchman.

Lately, this had become a ritual: silent watch, wrist raised, eyes fixed on hands that moved with a steady, indifferent glide, almost cynical in its calm. He searched for something in that constant motion. A delay. A deviation. A sign.

But all it gave him was silence.

Sweat dampened his palms. He rubbed the strap between his fingers, small, repetitive movements, like a tic. His thoughts, already too many, began to stumble over each other.
"Where are they?" he wondered, without speaking. "They should've been back by now..."

Every sound became a possible revelation. Every rustle, a faint hope. He was caught between two worlds: one mechanical, cold, Swiss-made in its precision, and the other, organic, unstable, dark.

A sound.

Footsteps, heavy, quick, on the platform. Steady rhythm, no hesitation. Harvey stood in one fluid, instinctive motion. The sound was headed toward his tent, with the kind of urgent control typical of soldiers carrying important messages. Never good news. Never.

With fingers trembling slightly, but steady, he began to dress. The movements were precise, almost ritualistic. Every buckle clicked into place without fault. Every strap tightened just right. His heartbeat matched the ticking of the second hand, fine, measured, merciless.

Beneath the weak light, Harvey was no longer a man waiting. He was a soldier. A functional piece of a larger mechanism, braced to respond. Time had passed. And now came the consequence.

When he stepped out of the tent, the cold, damp air of the station struck his face like a silent slap, waking every sense at once. He descended the narrow steps of the suspended tent with calm, deliberate movements, feeling the moisture cling to his temples and the tense line of his neck. The gas lamp hanging from the station's vaulted ceiling trembled faintly in the draught coming from the eastern tunnel, casting flickering shadows across the uneven tiles.

In that yellow, almost petroleum-coloured light, he saw a familiar figure. A young man, posture slumped, knees bent, breath laboured. His faded green camo jacket hung open at the collar, stained with dried salt. Same-cut trousers clung stiffly over a pair of work boots, light brown, faintly polished with lamp soot.

His face was carved with effort and damp. Under the unstable glow, his blond hair, soaked in sweat, looked metallic, almost alien. His eyes, black but alert, stared at the cracked stone tiles beneath him. He leaned forward, palms flat on his knees, as if the station floor might somehow offer answers.

Harvey stepped down the last rung and stopped at a measured distance.

"Michael. What the hell are you doing, running across the platform at this hour? You nearly woke half the station. What's going on?"

Michael looked up slowly, attempting a faint, drained smile. His cheeks were flushed, and when he spoke, his voice was low and tight.

"Where do you think I was headed, if not to you?"

It was meant to sound casual. It didn't. Beneath the glaze of irony, the crack showed clearly.

Harvey didn't move. One thought had already formed: something's happened. And not just anything.

"You sure you're alright? What the hell's going on?"

Michael straightened his back. Swallowed hard. His eyes betrayed the effort of trying to make sense of what he'd just seen.

"I'm... lost for words. Chris and I were patrolling the eastern corridor, near Adam Stewart's office. We could hear him whistling inside. He sounded calm. I called out, "Be right there!" But... he didn't respond. Or... he did. In his own way. He came out suddenly. No warning. Eyes locked. Jaw clenched. He walked straight at us and started yelling, like we were late by days, not seconds. He was shouting so loud I'm surprised you didn't hear it. No explanation. Not a single word. Just a gesture, one short, sharp motion, toward you. That's all. When I went in after him, he was standing with his face to the rounded window. Still. Arms crossed. Shoulders stiff. Staring past the grime on the glass like he could see something beyond the platform. He didn't turn. Didn't say anything at first. Then, without moving, he raised his voice: I was to find you. To bring you. At all costs. If you were asleep, I was to wake you. I haven't seen that look in his eyes since... I don't even know when. It's serious, Harvey. Very serious."

"Michael... who? Who are you talking about? Is... is this about Adam?"

"Of course it is. Who else?"

Harvey didn't answer. He raised a hand with slow effort and ran his fingers through his beard, an automatic gesture, without intent. The thoughts weren't coming one by one anymore. They

were all arriving at once, looping, spinning with no way out. Adrian. Mason. Missing for hours. The silence stretched. Hardened around them like a cold crust.

He knew exactly what they were supposed to be doing. They'd left four hours ago, on a routine dispatch, a link run to the next station. Nothing complicated. Nothing dangerous. But Adrian had mentioned, offhand, that he'd stop by Adam's first. "Just a quick question," he'd said. Nothing more.

Harvey remained still. One second. Two. The idea that the manager had given them a new assignment wasn't impossible, but it was unlikely. Orders weren't adjusted mid-route. Not in their system. Everything was written. Stamped. Checked. That's how it had always been.

A cold draught passed over the back of his neck. Too cold for just a thought. What if they'd never made it to their destination? What if Adam had diverted them? Rerouted them without telling him? Or… what if he'd sent them up?

Surface missions weren't an option. They were a last resort. A serious exception, granted only when there were no other alternatives. Only Adam Stewart had the authority to approve such a decision, and even then, he did it rarely, with caution, and only when every other route had failed. The protocol required written clearance, double-registered, in the presence of the platform officer. Without that document, no one went up. But what if Adrian and Mason had already been sent, with no signature? What if something had broken down at Canary Wharf, and they'd been pushed between the cracks, quiet executors of a desperate order?

His jaw clenched. He wasn't the kind to panic. Nor one to spiral into speculation. But Adam's behaviour, the insistence, the look in his eyes, the silence before the order, it all threaded itself into a pattern he knew too well. A pattern that meant trouble.

He tried to push the thoughts back. But they came anyway. Sharper. Deeper. Wrapping around him like rusted wire pulled across a wound.

Out on the platform, in front of the suspended tent, a kind of tension had begun to thicken in the air, like a cold, sticky film that clung to the skin and stayed there. No sign from the tunnel. No footsteps. No word. Only questions. And absence, heavy, precise, like an object you can't see but feel all the same.

"This isn't good…" Harvey muttered, his voice low and dry. A deep line formed across his brow, hard to smooth out.
"The way Adam behaved… that wasn't a whim. I know him well enough. He doesn't react like that unless things are slipping. Unless something's certain. And he doesn't allow for errors. Or gestures without meaning. If he's done what I think... it's already too late for them."

Harvey's gaze lifted slowly, but didn't settle on anything. It looked as if he were staring through the walls of the tent, through the station itself. The thought kept flowing in a low voice, more a late confession than a statement, spoken more to himself than to Michael.

"Adrian and Mason should've been back by now. We both know how things work down here, in this station. When someone's late, there's no room for maybes. Something's broken. I

should’ve gone after them. Waiting was a mistake. Unless they’re already back... and I’ve missed it. No, no, I’d know. This silence, this tension, it’s not confusion. It’s consequence."

Then he stopped, said nothing. Just for a moment. Then turned his gaze to Michael, expressionless. Just a quiet, neutral stare, behind which guilt and resolve quietly mingled.

"Do you know anything about them?"

Michael shook his head slightly, breathing through his nose.

"No. As far as I know, they haven’t returned. If they had, I’d have seen them. Chris and I patrolled the platform constantly. I asked around. Everyone. The customs officers on the west side told us to check the east, but it didn’t make sense.
No one comes through that way. Not with the route they were given. That would mean they went up. And came back through another entry point. Which… you know how unlikely that is."

He paused a moment, then added, more pragmatically:

"I said I’d still ask the east line officers. But I doubt we’ll find anything there. No point wasting time on guesses and nerves. Best thing is to speak with Stewart directly. I’ve got a feeling he knows more than he’s letting on. You want to go?"

Harvey stayed silent for a few seconds.

"Do I have a choice?"

"No, mate," said Michael, with a faint, humourless smile. "Talk to him. And please, tell me what you find out."

"You sound curious."

"I am. Very."

Harvey moved off without haste, but with a clear direction in his stride. After a few yards, he stopped. His eyes drifted back over his shoulder, to the dark outline of the suspended shelter. For a second, he thought of grabbing his military rucksack. No alarm. No call to arms. Just a quiet pressure in his gut, the same he’d felt the morning Adrian left. A knot that wouldn’t go away.

He ignored it. No room for hesitation.

Without looking back again, he turned toward the manager’s office.

Adam Stewart was fifty-seven. Manager of North Greenwich. Quiet-voiced, reserved, and careful with what he said, and what he didn’t. He didn’t use more words than needed. He chose them precisely, delivered them rarely, with sharp clarity. And others, inevitably, listened. He didn’t raise his voice. Never slammed fists on the table. But everything stopped when he spoke.

At first glance, his eyes seemed warm, brown, slightly shaded, but if you held that gaze more than a few seconds, something else emerged: something that pierced, that stripped you bare. Saying "no" became difficult. Even when you needed to.

His forehead was unusually smooth for his age. Some joked, asking if he'd saved a miracle cream from the surface. He would smile briefly, never answering. His hair was grey, trimmed evenly, combed with care, as if every strand obeyed some hidden order. His beard, trimmed less often, lent him a vaguely Nordic air, a quiet authority, free from theatrics. For those who didn't know him, he remained a riddle: was he harsh, or merely disciplined?

He had an average build. Not someone who commanded space by size. But the way he moved drew attention, calm, deliberate, without hesitation. He didn't need to slam doors. When he walked the corridors, his steps were enough. In North Greenwich, and not only there, but no one also else carried more weight in decisions.

In another life, before the collapse, before isolation, he had been a bank director. He ran a financial giant in London at an age when others barely managed a side office. Then the War came. Time fractured. And Adam Stewart, along with a handful of others, withdrew underground.

The rest adapted. He built.

Slowly but steadily, he became the architect of a functional system. No illusions. No compromise. Under his command, North Greenwich was among the first stations to establish pig farms in the lateral chambers, dug straight into the damp rock at the end of the tunnel, beyond the platform.

The pens were made from melted and re-welded Tube railings, shaped with improvised gear. The sows, aggressive, filthy, heavy, were fed shredded scraps, and the stench of faeces, scorched skin, and slaughterhouse clung to the air, dense and permanent. Overhead, in the shaded zones, they cultivated mushrooms. Modified strains, adapted to damp and synthetic feed. The humus was a mix of organic waste, rags, rendered fat, and congealed blood.

Each crop was supervised by platform soldiers. The workers wore masks, thick gloves, clothing sealed to the neck. Not out of fear of disease, but of error. One misstep in a contaminated patch could mean infection, or punishment. Sometimes both.

The slaughter never stopped. The blades, ripped from rusted track, had been roughly sharpened on concrete blocks. The wooden boards, always wet, stank of mildew and dried blood. There, the meat was pulled into rough strips, more torn than cut. The scales, relics with cracked plates and makeshift counterweights, always leaned toward dishonesty. Blood drained continuously into a corroded iron chute that ran into sealed sewers, tar-lined, from which no one wanted to know what emerged.

The washing water was never clean. It came from massive tanks painted matte grey, guarded by armed sentries. What exactly they contained, no one asked. The stench that rose from them was heavy, metallic, with traces of old chemicals. Sometimes, after rinsing, the meat was hung on rusted hooks from low beams, above pits of spent coals. It smoked slowly in a thick, greenish haze, from melted plastic branches and unknown fibres. That, they said, made it "safe". Or at least harder to recognise.

And it all worked. No banners. No speeches. No praise.

Just system.

And he held it together.

The electricity came from above, an unreliable, distant source, fed through a system of solar panels clumsily fixed to the carcass of a collapsed office tower. The broken glass had been swept away, the twisted frames reinforced with thick wire. The panels, mounted at unstable angles, caught what little daylight remained and funnelled it down into the depths. The cables dropped through a sealed shaft, lined with salvaged insulation, and disappeared into the belly of an old transformer, worn out, blackened with damp. It was fed periodically with batteries salvaged from the surface, some recharged using improvised rigs, others degraded and leaking, all handled by the scouts before reaching the transformer.

A constant hum filled the air. The current moved through the wires like a sick murmur. The contactors twitched faintly with every trigger. Fluorescent lamps flickered at irregular intervals, as if some unseen force was breathing unevenly throughout the station. The feeling was always the same: everything was running, but nothing was secure. The station was alive but balanced on the edge of collapse.

Further down, near the end of a side corridor, new structures had appeared. A makeshift bench, a resource room. At first, they seemed like gestures, signs that more might be possible. But as supplies from the surface began to accumulate, fresh rooms were dug into the station's damp walls. Storage spaces, archives, lockable compartments. And with them, ambition grew.

The walk from Harvey's shelter to Stewart's office wasn't long, but that evening, it felt endless. Each step affirmed the unrest. His soles pressed against wet concrete, but his mind pulled backward in time. Not just hours, decades.

This path, through the cold silence of the tunnel, felt painfully close to the route he used to take to school, long ago, when the world still pulsed, when the air still smelled of fresh rain, not rust and damp, when birds made actual noise, not just memory, when traffic lights blinked pointlessly, and dogs ran wild through open grass.

Now, the station was no longer the same, or perhaps he was the one who had changed. With each yard, his eyes caught on details he'd once ignored. New streaks on the walls, deeper cracks, darker stains. He didn't know whether they had appeared during the weeks he'd been bedridden after the accident, or if memory was lying to him. Maybe he was just seeing things differently. Older.

The old blue paint on the columns had been touched up, but not fully. Beneath the dull layer, the older marks showed through, like veins in a tired body. The floor was fractured in new ways, or maybe he was only noticing them now.

The shelters, strung along the tracks, looked more fragile than ever. Cracked panel boards, blackened planks, twisted sheets of metal held together with copper wire. The older homes leaned on dry timber beams. Others, on rope frames pulled down from collapsed ceilings. They were cheap, unsafe, but they worked. The old plaster, twenty years of damp and fire,

still clung to the ceilings. Stained, flaking, with clumps ready to fall. But it held. And as long as it held, no one asked for more.

The station was asleep, not in rest, in suspension. Like a living thing breathing slow, weaker by the minute, right at the edge of consciousness. No movement. No voices. Only the echo of Harvey's footsteps, stretching along the walls and back again over the cold floor, multiplying like a warning only he could hear.

The manager's office was a round structure, old, once a newspaper kiosk, now turned command centre. It had windows on all sides, and from within, everything could be seen: the side entrances, the sealed door, the work platforms, the tunnel to the east, the mushroom depot, every corner of the operational zone. Stewart had chosen the spot with care, not for comfort, for control. He observed. He assessed. He decided. No rush. No hesitation. No mistakes.

Harvey stopped in front of the door. One second. Two. His heartbeat unevenly, but he couldn't hear it. He raised a hand and knocked twice, short, even, without force. Then pushed the door and stepped inside.

The air was different in there, colder, heavier, as if everything he was about to learn was already waiting for him in that room.

He was ready for bad news.

But somewhere, in a quiet corner of his mind, he still held on to the thought that maybe, just maybe, there was still room for a miracle.