

Chapter 3: Between Fire and Darkness

He placed the Bible last, with a slow, deliberate gesture, between the supply pack and the sleeping bag, in the side pocket of the rucksack. The old leather cover creaked faintly under the pressure of his palm, like a living relic reacting to touch. He opened it for a moment, without reading. Just to let his finger touch the corner of a page. It wasn't a ritual. Nor a superstition. It was an anchor. A quiet discipline of the mind. But a necessary one.

Everything Stewart had prepared for him was there: the pack, the supplies, the filters, the papers. But it wasn't enough. For what lay ahead, he needed something else. Things you couldn't pack memory, guilt, something to remind him who he was. And why he was going. The rest was just weight. The Bible, the only thing that still kept quiet without judging him, had to come too.

He slung the assault rifle over his shoulder, feeling its weight like a cold promise. Checked the sleeping bag strapped to the bottom of the rucksack. The gear didn't feel heavy, but every item had its own invisible weight. Not metal. Thought. Choice. Each gram tied him to an unspoken question. The damp wall of North Greenwich station held a strange vibration. It wasn't an earthquake. It was a tension that hadn't burst. Yet.

He walked between the sleeping tents with steady, controlled steps. His boots hit the ground with a dull thud, swallowed at once by the clammy concrete. It was early. Or late. It didn't matter anymore. Time had no meaning. Only direction. And each step took him closer to the westbound platform, the one leading into the tunnel beneath the Thames, towards Canary Wharf. And to a mission that was no longer just an order. It was a rupture.

This wasn't departure. It was parting from everything that could still be called stable.

His thoughts circled, obsessively, around Adrian and Mason. Their disappearance was too clean, too straight a line. Too quiet. If they'd been wounded, they would have come back. If they'd been captured, they would have left a sign. But they hadn't. No traces. No rumours. Just a void. Cold. Silent.

He couldn't afford to falter. The message had to be delivered. And the path, however dark, wasn't optional. If the truth about his friends waited at the end, he would face it. No matter what form it took.

In his right hand, the map. In the left, the past. On his shoulders, all that still mattered.

The platform silence was thick. Unnatural. Like cold skin stretched over a wound that hadn't closed. A few days ago, the tunnels had stirred. Voices, footsteps, movement. Now, nothing. Only an absence too perfect. Harvey knew. Silence wasn't emptiness. It was prelude. Beneath it, something breathed. Waiting.

He'd felt it before.

Twenty years ago. When he first went underground. With his father, a train conductor, and his younger brother, Alex. It wasn't a day. It was a rupture. The atomic sirens had screamed suddenly. Not as a warning, but as a command. The city fractured into chaos. Invisible fires. People who didn't run. They disintegrated. An exodus without a name.

And from that collapse, he descended. That's how it all began.

Back then, journeys with his father were sacred. The weather didn't matter. Nor homework. Nor what his mother said. Every week, he'd climb into the cabin, into that stained uniform, and they'd ride the Tube together. Just the two of them. A ritual without words but one that shattered routine into sharp, cold pieces. His mother protested. Said it was dangerous. That it would ruin him. That he'd lose himself. But Harvey knew. Underground there was silence. Order. Steel. The Tube wasn't just transport. It was a living network, familiar to the point of pain. He knew every bend, every missing sign, every flake of cracked wall. It wasn't learned. It was tattooed in memory, in blood. Names, connections, the passages between stations, they were clearer than his brother's face. And perhaps that's why, now, he knew. He felt it. Something was off.

To him, every route became a new map. Not drawn. Absorbed. A micro-topography of change. A missing cable. A candle moved. A different sound. It had been his journal. The world that shaped him. That space, damp, cold, filthy, was home. Not the dorm in North Greenwich. Not the guardroom. The Tube. Only there did he feel whole, when the rest of the world fell apart. Now, rifle slung over his shoulder, passing corners he once knew by heart, he had the clear sense that they no longer belonged to him. That he'd been evicted, without warning. The familiar places had twisted. Warped. Distorted by time. The former corridors looked like an old photo, stained by damp. Over the tracks, over the worn slabs, there were black-cloth huts, rusted benches turned into beds, cut-up containers turned into rooms. Filth with structure. Enforced survival.

The light didn't help. The gas lamps spread a weak, choked flicker. They didn't illuminate, more like they made the shadows tremble, slow and misshapen, like outlines of beings unsure whether they still existed. The walls soaked in that light, crushed it, left behind only a remnant, a flicker of a past that had died in silence. The air was heavy. Loaded. Not just with dust. Not just with damp. There was something alive in it. A smell of mould. Of meat kept wrong. Of scorched grease and clothes washed too often. Harvey felt it. Not just in his chest. In his palms. On his nape. In every layer of clothing stuck to him.

He paused. The dripping. He knew it. He'd listened to it his whole life. But now it was different. It wasn't background noise. It was a beat. There, in the ceiling. There, in him. A precise drop. A forgotten clock. And strangely, it pulsed the same as his heart. In sync. Obsessive. Everything felt like a warning. But too calm to obey. Too quiet to believe. The underground was no longer a place to explore. It was a minefield. A corridor where every step could be the last. The past had become a trap.

The adverts on the walls, gaudy colours, false faces, forced optimism, now hung in tatters, torn by damp and hate. Layers upon layers of grime. Words carved in with blades. No message made sense anymore. Only the desperation remained. That was clear enough. The escalators, once full of life, of steps, of echoes, were now rusted sculptures. Locked in their positions, stuck in vigil. No more life in them. Just husks they passed by, like giant corpses long forgotten.

The Tube wasn't empty. It was quiet. People lived here. Not above ground. Not in other worlds. Here. They had crept into the ruins. Tamed them. Turned them into shelters. Into lives. For those born below, there was no "outside." No "just around the corner." Only

stations. Corridors. Cellars. Collapsed offices turned into rooms. Rooms replacing flats. Every square metre had been claimed by hunger, cold, and need.

Harvey moved through them without hesitation. Steady steps. Controlled breathing. He wasn't rushing. But he wasn't stopping either. He knew silence could fool you. Just like hope.

After a few more steps, a flame. Small. Unsteady. It burned weakly, but enough to push back the fingernails of darkness clawing around it. It sat on an old, probably broken grill, black rods outlined beneath the damp wood. The shadows of four customs guards stretched misshapen across the cold tiles, right next to the tunnel's mouth. Elongated. Twisted. Like projections of people who hadn't been people in a long time.

They sat. Almost motionless. Backs curved. Shoulders heavy. Hands resting on their knees, yet ready to rise. The fire was an excuse. The silence, the truth. They spoke rarely. In whispers. No full sentences. Just sounds lost between the crackle of wood and the echo of damp walls.

The firelight cut across their faces in sharp angles. Hollow cheeks. Yellowed skin. Eyes sunken. Stained uniforms, frayed at the edges, with barely visible badges. But the vigilance was still there. Not in armour. In stance. In the way their hands stayed close to their belts. In posture. None of them smiled. None of them slept. They just existed. Like fragments of a forgotten watch left in the dark.

One of them, older, with a hunched back and eyes buried deep in their sockets, looked up at Harvey. He spoke slowly. His voice was rusted, but clear. Like a dulled knife.

"Evening, Harvey. Still can't sleep?"

There was no irony in the tone. Just tiredness. An old, layered weariness, buried in the flesh, that no longer needed explanation. The wrinkles no longer belonged to time. They belonged to the Tube. To every hour of watch, to every look into the dark that showed nothing back. His thick, untrimmed moustache wasn't style. It was a relic. The air of a man who'd seen too much, lost too much, and had nothing left to prove. His coat, once official, had been swallowed by the Tube, stained, faded, missing a button, a thick patch stitched over the shoulder. Every detail a silent witness.

Harvey stepped closer. He didn't want to disturb the balance of the silence. But he couldn't stay back either. The weak light flickered across their faces, carving harsh shadows beneath their eyes and across their shut mouths.

"Evening, all."

His voice felt like an intruder. As if it wasn't meant to come out but stay clenched between his teeth. He paused, briefly, but heavily. Then sighed.

"I... I can't sleep. Adrian and Mason should've been back hours ago. I tried not to think about it. But the mind doesn't let go. I can't lie there, knowing they're not here. Knowing something's wrong."

The fire didn't answer. The wood crackled faintly, but no one spoke. The silence that followed wasn't ignorance. It was a quiet recognition. That "something's wrong" was something they all felt. Already. Before Harvey arrived. The smell of absence, of disappearance, of failure, was in the air. But no one had the courage to name it.

Harvey could feel the weight of Adam's words. They came back, sharp, like a stopped siren inside his head:

"Don't raise suspicion. You're on a classified mission. You're not allowed to trust anyone. If chaos breaks out before we make the first move, everything's lost."

He knew he wasn't supposed to say anything. He knew. But sometimes, a sentence spoken by the fire could reconfigure silence, even when it hurts.

The customs officers' expressions had changed. Not suddenly. Just subtly. Fibre by fibre. One of them, young, but with worn-out eyes, was stirring slowly in a pot hanging above the flame. He raised an eyebrow without haste, without hostility, just with the tiredness of someone who'd heard every possible version of the same lies.

"Harvey, don't act like the Tube's some peaceful land. You've lived here long enough to know how things go. What do you mean... 'no idea'? You really don't know what's going on with the neighbours?"

The tone was soft, but soft like a well-maintained blade. Not accusatory, just heavy, like someone who sees the lie, but no longer has the energy to call it out.

Harvey didn't reply immediately. He bit his lip. Not hard. Just enough to feel the memory of past mistakes. He had that impulse, the one to say too much. He'd had it since childhood. But now... now was different.

The fire flickered faintly. The wet wood hissed. The air came from a side gallery, cold and sharp, smelling of stone and old damp. It slipped under clothes, through collars, through sleeves, and into thoughts.

The customs men weren't just waiting for warmth.

They were waiting for mushroom tea.

It was a routine, yes, but not a casual one. The tea was more than a drink. It was a boundary, between watchfulness and sleep, between clarity and drifting, against contamination, against the despair that sometimes crept through cracks no one could see, but everyone could feel. Despite the sealed gate, despite the filters, despite the thick concrete, they all knew the truth:

Nothing was ever safe.

The tea kept their hands busy. Kept their minds away from what might come from above, from outside, from somewhere else. It was a temporary illusion of control, but one they could no longer give up. A ritual. A form of resistance. And for a few sips, it worked.

The old man, the same one who had spoken first, ran his cracked fingers through his thick beard, which covered his mouth almost completely. A slow, reflexive movement, the kind of gesture made by someone who no longer felt the need to wash or shave but still clung to such acts as anchors from another time.

"That disappearance... it might be tied to what happened at Canada Water. Have you heard what went on there, a few hours ago?"

The voice was low, but not soft. It wasn't a question. It was a line cast into murky waters, an attempt to drag truth to the surface, to force a reaction.

The remark stirred Harvey. Not sharply. More like being pulled from sleep by a cold touch. He wasn't the type to react quickly, but that name, that place, that idea... they all felt embedded deep in the core of his mission. He moved closer to the fire, pulled over a wooden crate, and sat down. Slowly, deliberately. Not to rest, but to listen.

These customs men weren't strangers. He knew their rhythm, he knew their tone. He knew how they breathed when there was calm, and how their silence started to ache when something was stirring beneath it. And that's why... he knew something was wrong now.

Another soldier, hands stretched toward the flame, spoke without looking at him.

"Canada Water. Something happened there. A few hours ago. We don't know what. But there were shots. Noise. And then this strange silence. Many ran toward Tower Gateway, tried to climb up. Some got lost through the side tunnels. Word is they made it as far as Bermondsey. That's what a trader told us, passed through earlier."

He stopped. Rubbed his hands together, but not from cold. Like someone trying to scrub something from his skin. From his soul. Maybe fear. Maybe guilt.

"I don't know if he told the truth. Haven't seen him since. We didn't get the chance to check. It was too... sudden. Too chaotic."

Harvey said nothing. But his chest tightened. He lowered his gaze. His jaw tensed, almost imperceptibly. An old tic. A sign that thoughts were piling in his head like steam in a cracked pipe.

Gunfire. There. At Canada Water.

It was too close.

Too dangerous.

Salim al-Kadir?

Or something else?

Harvey stared into the fire. He didn't blink. The flames lit his face in flickers of shadow and red. And in his mind, a thought with razor edges:

If this is the beginning, then we're already too late.

It was a certainty that didn't need confirmation.

Salim al-Kadir had warned them. In heavy words, almost religious. Some called him a fanatic. Others, a strategist. Harvey had never met him personally. Only fragments of reports, rumours carried by exhausted messengers, cryptic journals passed from station to station. But now... something inside him pricked. As if that prophetic tone, which had once seemed like rhetoric or manipulation, had been something else. Maybe even a warning. Maybe the civil war people whispered about, in the station basements, was no longer just a possibility. Maybe it had already begun. And he, like so many others, had ignored it for far too long.

But if that was true... then this wasn't just about politics anymore.

It was the beginning of the end.

Or, worse still... perhaps the deforms had broken into the underground. Not rumours. Not shadows. A real presence. If the runaways from Canada Water had fled in fear of them, if the darkness in that station had been pierced by something alive, then Adrian and Mason were already caught in a nightmare with no exit.

A cold sting settled on the back of his neck. It wasn't imagination. It was the old signal, the one that never failed.

Harvey turned his gaze towards the black tunnel behind the fire. His palm rested close to his weapon, as if the darkness itself might take shape at any moment. Neither inter-station conflict nor creatures from the depths could be taken lightly. Anything that didn't kill outright would carve into you more slowly, more deeply.

A faint sound. Or maybe an illusion. Drips? Breathing? A distorted echo? Harvey stayed perfectly still.

In that drawn-out silence, the old man across from him extended a plastic cup. White, stained, with a chipped rim and a layer of near-black tea steaming faintly. Harvey stared at it, unmoving, not reaching.

The old inspection reflex kicked in without effort. It wasn't fear. It was discipline. He lifted the cup, tilted it slightly, turned it towards the light. The old stain at the bottom. The nearly invisible crack along the side. A thread of embedded dirt, impossible to clean.

In another time, he would have refused it. Would have said something ironic, cold, with that slanted smile, just enough to show he noticed everything. But now... now he simply held it. Felt its warmth. It had never been about taste. It was a ritual. A memory from a world that had decayed slowly, until small gestures became forms of dignity.

He still inspected objects. Still clung to details. Not for safety. But because it was the only thing that still gave him a sense of control. A temporary balance.

Harvey couldn't afford outbursts. Or tirades. But every small imperfection, a dirty object, a careless gesture, a rushed line, was an opportunity. A release. A silent form of defiance in a world falling apart, piece by piece.

His critique wasn't loud. It was calculated. Precise. With an edge. Especially when the dislike for the person before him had already set in. Then the words came quiet, but exact, like a scalpel drawn by a tired surgeon. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't threaten. He just spoke. And his words made the other wish he hadn't.

The excuses... he knew them by heart. "There's no running water." "It's scarce." "I didn't notice the filth." Worn out, like the walls of the stations. But he didn't accept them. For Harvey, excuses were the same as giving up. And he didn't give up.

His smile, when it came, was tight, frozen. Never warm. That smile was the sign something was coming. A cold observation, calmly delivered, but one that cut through silence. For him, those were rare chances to hold on to who he was, in a world constantly asking for compromise.

That's how he defended himself. Not with weapons. But with discontent, spoken in measured doses.

The old man who had offered the cup was Mark Redford. A former train control inspector before the Collapse. His face was gaunt, discoloured, with a thick, unkempt moustache and deep grey eyes that showed the clarity of someone who had seen too much, and chosen to stay. Because down here, in the Tube, running was no longer an option.

Beside him, withdrawn, with a permanently furrowed brow, sat Yusuf Baran. Tall, bony, of Kurdish origin, his bronzed skin seemed cured by years in the stations' damp air. A Sunni convert in his youth, he wore a leather amulet tucked under his uniform. He only spoke when necessary. But when he did, his words landed heavy.

The third figure, with round glasses and twitchy gestures, was Stanislaw Kowalski, from Kraków. His English was rough, but correct. A disciplined Catholic. He never missed a religious holiday, even though he had no calendar. He had etched one onto the lid of a leather journal. Carved the dates in order. No deviation. No forgiveness.

The last, Kwame Okoye, came from south London, a child of Nigerian immigration. Evangelical in the past, now without a god. He said that here, in the Tube, "God's the last one still listening." He had a crescent-shaped scar on his forearm. Harvey knew what caused it. A deform. It had cut deep at Euston. And since then, Kwame never slept without a hand on his weapon.

Each of them was something else. A direction. A fracture. A belief. And between them, the fire wasn't just fire. It was the last form of cohesion. As long as it burned, they could still pretend they had a purpose.

"Here you go, Harvey," said Mark, offering the tea again. A thin wisp of steam rose from the plastic cup, drawing fading spirals in the heavy air. "A bit of tea, might clear the dark thoughts. Maybe help you sleep."

He hadn't asked him anything. Just held his gaze a moment longer than needed. He had seen something in Harvey's silence, a deep absence, hard to mask. But he hadn't pushed. He knew some questions never bring answers.

Harvey accepted the cup. Said nothing. Blew gently across the dark liquid. Not to cool it. But to settle his thoughts.

He lifted his gaze and looked at them, one by one, without rush. Faces scorched by time, by dust, by fear. A circle of men who no longer needed introductions.

"So... did you believe him, or not?"

A brief pause. Intentional.

"When exactly did you find out?"

His voice was low, but clear. Not a question. An opening. A closing. A push for reaction. And they all felt it. The fire no longer seemed quite so warm.

"Recently," replied Yusuf, with that restrained tone that left no room for interpretation.

Harvey respected him. Or maybe just tolerated him, precisely because he wasn't weak. Yusuf didn't jump to conclusions. Didn't waste gestures. He was the kind of man who, in another time, would've been considered suspicious. Now he was simply indispensable.

The tea wasn't memorable. But it did its job. It warmed his stomach, his chest, his hands. The taste, metallic, bitter, with a hint of old damp, didn't matter. In the underground, you didn't seek flavour. You sought effect. Warmth. An excuse.

In the Tube, tea had become more than a drink. It was an act. A statement. Tea bags weren't found. They were earned. Carried at risk. Brought down from Green Park, from hidden depots, by those who dared climb up and return with little, but alive. It was for negotiations, for meetings between leaders. Or for those who still believed a bitter taste could hold a community together.

Harvey watched Yusuf. He sipped slowly, no grimace, no haste. Never burned himself. Always drank directly. Like a man who no longer felt surface pain.

Harvey had tried. Dozens of times. Never managed it. Always blew on it. Always waited. He wondered if that meant he hadn't fully adapted. That something from above still lived in him. A hesitation he couldn't shake.

Maybe it was fear. Maybe it was clarity. Or maybe it was that trace of humanity that stopped him becoming one with the Tube.

True belonging didn't mean drinking without reaction. It meant knowing it burned and drinking anyway.

Maybe that was what strength meant, underground.

"When I asked him what happened, his face changed," said Stanislaw, his low voice barely rising over the crackling fire. "Not fear... no. Darkened. Like he'd seen something he couldn't easily speak of. "He told me he came from Waterloo, passed through Canada Water. First shots came suddenly. No warning."

Harvey didn't blink. He held the cup close to his mouth, but didn't sip.

"He said people started running in all directions. Without logic. Children. Elders. Hollowed faces twisted in panic. He ducked behind a pillar. Asked someone what was happening. The answer was vague. No one really knew. But everyone ran for the sealed gate. Some wanted to reach Canary Wharf. Others were murmuring something about a checkpoint to the east... even Tower Gateway, though no one knew if the path there was still safe."

Stanislaw paused. Rubbed his fingers over the fire. Not from cold. Just a reflex, keeping motion while the mind processed.

"He used the chaos. Slipped past the checkpoint without being stopped. Made it into the tunnel, and from there, ran until he reached us."

Harvey blew gently across his tea, but his thoughts boiled harder than the liquid.

"Interesting," he murmured, without looking up.

The words were for him. Not for the others. Not even for Stanislaw.

Gunfire. A drifting crowd. That face, disfigured by fear.

He was trying to piece it together. No detail escaped him. The sealed gate, the fallback point. The passage said to lead east. The uncontrolled chaos. And that word returning in so many versions, whispered or feared: Canary Wharf.

None of it was random.

Harvey didn't move, but something stirred inside him. The meaning was there, in the air. Still faint. Still unformed. But present. And dangerous.

A chill curled along his spine, like a cold blade sliding over skin. It wasn't the temperature, the tea's steam still warmed his face, soothing almost. But the contrast was unbearable. Heat on the skin, cold in the bones. The cold didn't come from the air. It came from thought.

Without realising, his mind slipped back into the invisible map of tunnels. He saw empty corridors. Sealed checkpoints. Doors half-open. And people. Rushed people, starved of hope, running towards Canary Wharf, hoping that there, beyond the gate, there was something else. Not better. Just something else. Something that didn't scream. Something that didn't kill.

He knew hope, in the Tube, was more fragile than a cracked gas mask.

Mark lowered his voice, but not his tone. His eyes glinted oddly in the firelight.

"From where I stand, everything's pointing west. Something's out there. Something's happening. And it's not just recent."

Harvey didn't reply. Just listened, one eyebrow slightly tensed.

"Things have completely fallen apart in those zones," said Yusuf Baran, his voice low but steady. "Not just Bond Street, on the Jubilee. Or Marylebone, on the Bakerloo. Further west."

Paddington, Acton Town on the Piccadilly, Edgware in the north, traders from the east... our people. They go in, and they don't come back. Or if they do, they're hollow. Souls and pockets.

He paused a moment. Sipped slowly from the cup. Then continued.

"The ones who make it out... they talk. Not all of them. But some. They say they're forced to pay huge taxes. Unofficial. No receipt. No explanation. A soldier with a gun, and a handheld out. If you refuse... you never make the next step."

Harvey stared straight at him. Didn't even blink.

"It's not about hunger there. It's not even chaos. It's something else. A network. A structure. A plan. And people... they don't stay because they're safe. They stay because they vanish."

The fire crackled faintly between them. The words hung in the air. Not even the draught stirred.

Harvey felt his thoughts beginning to connect. Slowly. Silently.

Yusuf sighed deeply, and his voice hardened. Not with anger. With bitterness.

"And it's not just about taxes, or chaos," he said. "It goes deeper. The ones in the west... they're different. Their mindset's changed. Or maybe it never was like ours. They live by rules we don't know. They don't talk. They don't negotiate. They keep their colonies sealed off. A parallel system. They refuse contact with the rest, like their world's completely separate from ours."

He paused a moment. He was looking at the fire but not seeing it.

"Over there... it's a strange order. A kind of discipline that has nothing to do with what we know. They look at us differently. It's not hatred. It's disdain. As if our existence is a weakness. And they're imposing their presence... step by step. Station by station."

The tone grew firmer. No emotion. No embellishment.

"This isn't about trade. Or resources. This is survival. They don't want coexistence. They want replacement. Their rules over ours. One flag. One truth."

His eyes were sad. Not angry. Not fanatical. Just worn out by the silence of others.

"And what scares me most... is that most people would rather not see."

Harvey didn't reply. But he felt truth and fear colliding somewhere, in the silence between them.

"Harvey... we can't pretend to be blind anymore. Not after all that's happened," said Kwame, in a low, hoarse voice, steady, unhesitating. "You know it. We all feel it. We don't need an official order to understand something's moving in the west. Not just in silence. In depth."

He stopped a moment. Not for effect. But to find a word he didn't want.

"It's like a fog. Not one that falls from the ceiling. One that comes from people. A shift in atmosphere inside our stations. In their eyes. In absences. In the fear no one wants to name."

The fire snapped briefly. Harvey said nothing.

"We all know what's said about the west. About their silence. About orders that go in and don't come back. Something's broken between the government and those stations. We don't know what. But the break is there. No one gets sent in anymore. No supplies. Just rumours."

Silence settled thick. Kwame went on, more quietly:

"Tell me, Harvey... do you really believe all those who show up at the meetings in Green Park are honest? Are with us? Have you noticed how fewer traders come from the west? How long's it been since anyone from there reached our station? Years, not months. And the scouts... how long since they could enter their zones? They've been told clearly: stop. No crossing. No reason. No discussion."

He lowered his voice and looked directly at him. No threat. Just fact.

"They talk of secret meetings. Parallel networks. Plans made without us. Of a west that no longer wants to be part of anything. To break away completely. To remain only for themselves."

Harvey's eyes were dark. No agreement. No denial. Just a pressing stillness. Everything he'd heard from the customs men was a harsh confirmation of Stewart's words. Nothing exaggerated. Just the truth. The raw truth.

"Tell us... when was the last time you were out there?"

A pause. Long.

"I'm not saying I'm overreacting. But if something's being prepared... we're in the dark. And this darkness doesn't forgive."

Harvey didn't answer straight away. He lifted the cup, touched it to his lip, but didn't drink. His thoughts moved slowly, in wide circles. Each sentence spoken earlier dragged a new question behind it. Inside, Adam's voice echoed again: "Don't raise suspicion. Not yet."

Then, without rush, without hesitation, he spoke:

"I was last at Lancaster Gate. No further. A year ago. Getting there was hard. Getting out was harder. Since then, no one's tried. Not from us. Not from them. And yes... I've heard the rumours. But none come with proof. Only fear."

He stopped. Then looked back at the fire, and his next words came barely audible:

"And sometimes, the rumours are more dangerous than what comes next."

Kwame didn't move his head, or his stare. He simply said:

"In twenty years, I've made it to the west once. That's all."

He spoke rarely, with weight. Each word placed like a stone on the table of silence stretched between them.

"If what you're saying is true... if something is happening in the west, then we're already one step behind. On my missions, I met people from there. Not many. But enough to notice. They didn't speak. They didn't ask questions. Their eyes were heavy, shut down. As if they carried something they didn't want anyone to see."

He paused a moment. He wasn't searching for words. He felt them, and he controlled them.

"I ignored them. Passed them by as if they didn't exist. Now... maybe I should've paid more attention."

His gaze dropped to the flame. The fire flickered weakly, dancing dim across the metal of the old pot.

"We can't afford to be passive. Not now. The west is no longer a territory. It's a question without an answer. And the unknown, when ignored too long, becomes danger."

No one replied. No movement. Just silence. It wasn't a pause in conversation. It was a realisation that had dropped hard, hard to bear, hard to forget.

Mark Redford sat with his hand on his knee, unmoving, his thick moustache twitching slightly with low breath. Stanislaw Kowalski had lowered his eyes to his stained notebook, though he wasn't writing. And Yusuf Baran, withdrawn, leaning against the rusted wall, was slowly running his fingers over the wooden amulet, as if trying to read it just through touch. He didn't speak. But he was watching. Harvey knew.

The fire crackled quietly. The old pot hanging above it swayed faintly, steam rising in spirals crushed quickly by the heavy air. The smell remained unchanged: stale damp, corroded metal, a trace of mushroom fermentation, and from the tunnel, a rancid draft, insinuating itself like the memory of some unnamed decay. One that had never been identified.

Harvey stood up slowly. Not to leave. But to feel the space differently. The air. The faint tremor in the floor. The silence where any illusion of safety choked. Beyond this fire, beyond their hardened faces, beyond the unspoken thoughts, the Tube went on. A filthy, living maze, linking people who didn't know each other but dreamed the same escape. With its own laws. Its invented rituals. Beliefs mixed into rust, into blood, into forgetting.

And with one single reality: survival.

The customs men remained still. In a broken circle, like statues sculpted from the plaster of damp. Hollow eyes yet watching. Jaws tight. Minds tied to a truth that could no longer be denied.

When the fire would die, what remained wasn't just the dark. It was what they carried inside. And that silence couldn't be guarded with weapons.

For them, survival was no longer physical. It was a quiet, constant battle with shadows that had no face. Some came from the west. Others... from within.

Harvey sipped the tea, then set the cup down beside his boots. After a short pause, he spoke:

"Still... I don't see the connection between Canada Water and my friends' delay. Adrian and Mason wouldn't have gone that far. They had no reason. No time. Their mission was simple. Clear. Adam's order was strict. And they... they're not the kind to deviate."

The customs officers' eyes remained fixed on the fire.

"How do you know that man was telling the truth?" Harvey asked, tone calm, but sharp. "Maybe he wasn't a trader. Maybe he was sent. Maybe he was testing our vigilance. Or maybe... he was one of those who bring more stories than goods."

He paused a moment. Then continued, without raising his voice:

"It's not the first time we've been fed rumours. And you all remember what happened to this station after that other 'trader' claimed he was followed by deforms between Canada Water and Bermondsey. Panic. Chaos. Hours lost. Resources wasted."

He turned to Stanislaw.

"We're close enough to the west to feel its pressure. And too close to afford the luxury of trusting just anyone. Especially those who come with no proof. Especially those who speak much and leave little behind."

The words dropped heavy. Not as accusation. As conclusion.

Yusuf, silent, lowered his head slightly. Not agreement. A respectful restraint. Or maybe... a confirmation.

Harvey added nothing. He didn't need to.

The silence did the rest.

"But how can you be so sure, Harvey, that they weren't forced to reach Canada Water?" asked Mark, without reproach, but with a clear unease in his voice. "They say they were seen near the neighbouring station... but who knows? Maybe they crossed further."

Harvey didn't answer straight away. He was watching the fire. The flames burned low, flickering like sick breath. The wood cracked rarely.

"I don't think they got that far," he said at last, voice low. "Adrian told me clearly what path he'd follow. I saw him shortly before they left. He was calm. Focused."

Silence returned, heavy.

"I remember he said he'd stop by Adam first. Had something to discuss with him. He didn't go into details. And now... I wonder if I should've stopped him. Or asked more. But back then... everything seemed in order."

He shook his head. Not in doubt. In guilt.

The flames danced in dim light. But around the fire, there was nothing left to say.

Only silence. And thoughts.

Harvey felt the platform shrinking around them. As if every second spent there deepened the sense that something was slipping. That everything left unsaid was being lost. And everything left undone had a cost.

He still sat on the wooden crate, but his body was tense. Back straight. Eyes on the fire. Mind elsewhere.

He had to reach Green Park. Deliver the document. Not be late. But something in him resisted. He couldn't separate the mission from the people. He couldn't ignore the thought that Adrian and Mason might need him. Right now.

His hand moved slowly to his chest. Fingers touched the inside pocket. The document was there. Still there. Still safe.

But in his mind... nothing felt safe.

He said nothing. But behind Harvey's silence, a decision pulsed, one not yet made.

Only time would tell if his steps would lead to Green Park. Or back, into the shadows.

"Let's not think the worst," said Mark then, in a voice meant to sound relaxed, but betraying a faint unease. "Maybe that trader just exaggerated. He seemed a bit drunk, if I'm honest. I'd rather believe it was all just talk. And that Adrian and Mason will come back soon. Just as they left."

No one disagreed. But no one agreed either. No smile. No sign of relief.

The words vanished into the thick air, absorbed by the grimy walls of the platform. The tunnels seemed to swallow anything that wasn't solid. Every sound, every movement, lost meaning in that space which kept only what could kill.

Harvey had heard. But no calm reached him. Not even for a moment.

Hope was a small flame. And here, the air was wet.

"Let's hope," he said.

No warmth in his voice. Just a sentence spoken out of duty. As if, in the absence of belief, saying the words still mattered.

He rose slowly. His back cracked softly, and a heavy fatigue spilled from his shoulders. He sighed, briefly, just enough to clear his chest for the next step.

"Thanks for the tea, lads."

His eyes paused on his watch. Not too late. Not too early. But long enough that he could no longer delay.

"I've got to go."

It wasn't a request. It was a statement.

And no one said, "take care."

The tunnel awaited. And everything unsaid... followed him.

Old Mark, who never missed details, shifted his gaze to the rucksack resting beside the crate. His brow lifted slightly. No theatrics. Just a clear observation.

"Judging by what you're carrying, I wouldn't say you're heading home for a nap."

The tone was gentle. But the question was there, even if left unspoken.

Harvey didn't hesitate. His voice remained calm. Without defence. Without hostility.

"You're right, mate. Just a quick check. One station over. Nothing complicated. Then I'll be back. Catch some sleep. On my mattress, if it's still warm."

His gaze stayed level. The answer wasn't a lie. But it wasn't the whole truth either.

Mark didn't press. He leaned on his knees and rested his hands in his lap. Weariness marked every motion.

Harvey lifted the rucksack and slung it over one shoulder, feeling its weight as a reminder. The rifle, half-hidden but easy to spot for trained eyes, had been a deliberate choice. He didn't want to look like he was hiding it. But not like he was flaunting it either.

The customs men said nothing. Maybe because they knew him. Or maybe because they were too tired to ask questions they didn't really want answered.

Harvey was heading to Canary Wharf. Officially.

But his path lay elsewhere. Green Park. The meeting with the President. And on the way... answers. About Adrian. About Mason. About everything moving in the shadows, closer by the hour.

"This document must reach the President's hands. You're the only one who can do it. No one else must open it. Not even you. Even if you think you know what's inside."

Adam's voice echoed in Harvey's mind, clear, with heavy pauses between the words. It wasn't a request. It was a mission. One without return.

Mark looked at him for a long moment, then, with a tired smile, gently touched his shoulder.

"I hope you find them, mate. I know the bond you've got with Adrian and Mason. You grew up together. But be careful. If you feel something's following you... don't look back. You wouldn't want to end up like that madman who nearly crossed the checkpoint screaming."

Those around him gave a short laugh, without joy. Just reflex.

Harvey gave a faint smile. But said nothing.

He adjusted the rifle at the side of his rucksack. The motion was automatic, but precise. He took out his headlamp, strapped it to his forehead, checked the contact. Then lifted the rucksack again and swung it over his shoulders in a single, calculated move. He was ready.

There was nothing left to say.

No gestures. No farewell words. Just slow, heavy steps toward the gallery entrance.

The platform lights faded behind him. Only the fire's faint flicker still pulsed. Ahead, only darkness.

Harvey switched on the lamp.

A narrow beam cut the thick night like a wound. The jagged, damp concrete walls revealed themselves in the forward light, like jaws tightening slowly, without haste, but inevitably. Each step sounded muffled, sunken, absorbed into the dead flesh of the tunnel. The air was dense, iron, damp, mould, time. An alchemy of fear and unfinished things.

He was on the Jubilee. The section between stations had become less and less safe lately. But here... here was different. Older. Deeper.

The document lay pressed to his chest, hidden beneath layers of fabric and silence.

His friends, vanished into the edge of thought. No trace. No sound. Only a growing pressure of absence.

And the darkness... was turning alive. Not hostile, not loud. Just present. A presence with no form but breathing.

Harvey moved forward. Not fast. Not hesitant. Just certain he wasn't being followed. Not yet. Not by anyone.

Only the quiet light of the lamp. Only the steps. Only the decision already beginning to exact its cost.