

Chapter 2: Between Fire and Darkness

He packed the Bible last, sliding it into the side pocket of his rucksack between the food supplies and his sleeping bag. The old leather cover creaked softly beneath his hand. He opened it for only a moment, not to read, but simply to let his finger rest against the edge of a yellowed page. The gesture was born of habit, one of the few things that had survived intact while so much else had withered away.

Everything Stewart had prepared for him was in its place: filters, tins of food, maps, ammunition, and documents sealed in plastic. Yet for the journey ahead, none of it felt sufficient; some things, like memory and guilt, could not be stowed in a rucksack. There remained a stubborn need to remember who he was and why he kept moving forward. The Bible was the only thing that could bear his silence without demanding an explanation.

He slung the rifle over his shoulder and checked the straps one last time. The kit did not feel especially heavy, but every item carried a weight of its own. The damp walls of North Greenwich station seemed to hold a strange vibration, as though the entire tunnel network were waiting for something that had not happened yet.

He walked between the sleeping tents with steady, measured steps. His boots struck the wet concrete with a dull sound, swallowed almost instantly by the tunnels. He no longer knew whether it was morning or night; underground, time had lost its meaning years ago. Only direction mattered, and every step brought him closer to the western platform and the tunnel running beneath the Thames towards Canary Wharf. With each stride, Harvey felt himself pulling away from the last things that still seemed stable.

His thoughts drifted back to Adrian and Mason, whose disappearance had been too clean, far too quiet. If they had been injured, they would have returned; if captured, they would have left a sign. But there had been nothing, only a cold emptiness that continued to expand within his mind. The message had to be delivered, and if the truth of their fate waited at the end of this journey, he would find it, whatever shape it had taken. In his right hand he carried the map; in his left, the weight of the past.

The silence hanging over the platform felt like cold skin stretched across a wound that had never fully healed. Only a few days earlier the tunnels had been alive with voices and movement, yet now there was only an absence too perfect to trust. Harvey knew that kind of silence; it did not mean emptiness, for beneath it, something was still breathing.

He had felt it before, twenty-five years earlier, when he first descended underground with his father and Alex. The nuclear warning sirens had erupted not as an alarm, but as a final command. The city had begun to collapse before anyone understood the scale of the ruin; fires without visible source lit the sky as crowds vanished into smoke and panic like an exodus without a name. It was from that chaos that he had entered the Tube, and that was where everything had truly begun.

Back then, travelling the tunnels with his father had felt almost sacred. Every week he climbed into the driver's cab and rode the lines beside him, despite his mother's constant warnings that the Underground would destroy him one day. Yet Harvey found an order there that the surface had long since lost. The Tube was more than transport; it was a living network, etched so deeply into his memory that it had become part of him. He knew every

curve, every passage between stations, and every stretch of peeling wall better than he knew the faces of many people. Perhaps that was why he could feel so clearly now that something had changed.

Every route had become an instinctive map inside his head. A missing cable. A lamp that had been moved. An echo that sounded different in the dark. The tunnels had shaped him. That damp, cold world felt more familiar than any room in North Greenwich. Only there did the world still seem to obey rules he could understand.

And yet now, as he passed through corridors he knew by heart, he had the unsettling sense that time had twisted them and stripped away the normality they once possessed. Black canvas shacks had appeared beside the rails. Shipping containers had been cut apart and turned into rooms. Rusted benches served as beds. Everything looked improvised against despair rather than against the cold.

Gas lamps cast a weak, sickly glow that illuminated almost nothing, merely making the shadows tremble along the walls. The station seemed to swallow every trace of light until only a dirty flicker remained, like the final remnant of a dead world.

The air hung heavy with damp, mould and burnt grease. The smell clung to clothing and skin alike. Harvey could feel it in his throat, at the back of his neck, in every layer of wet fabric weighing against his body.

He stopped when he heard water dripping from the ceiling. He had listened to that sound his entire life. But now it no longer felt like part of the station's background noise. It fell slowly and precisely, like a forgotten clock somewhere in the darkness, almost keeping pace with his heartbeat.

Everything around him felt like a warning too calm to believe. The Underground was no longer a place that could be explored. It had become a territory where every step concealed the possibility of an ending.

Old advertisements hung from the walls in mould-covered tatters beneath layers of dirt. Their bright colours and smiling faces no longer promised anything. Only desperation remained visible.

The escalators, once filled with voices and movement, stood frozen in darkness like the skeletons of enormous beasts abandoned in the middle of the station.

The Tube was not empty. People lived here, packed into ruins they had learned to turn into shelter. For those born beneath the ground there was no such thing as outside. There were only stations, corridors, rooms carved out of abandoned offices, and bunkers that had taken the place of flats. Every corner had been claimed by hunger, cold and the need to survive one more day.

Harvey moved among them without hesitation, his pace steady, his breathing controlled. He neither hurried nor slowed. Underground, silence could kill as easily as panic.

A few moments later he spotted the flame.

Small and unsteady, it flickered above a rusted grill fed by damp wood that hissed quietly as it burned. It marked the customs post at the western end of the station, the last checkpoint

before the tunnel leading to Canary Wharf. The light pushed the darkness back only a few yards. The shadows of the four customs guards stretched across the cold paving stones near the tunnel entrance, long and distorted, like figures forgotten between two worlds.

They sat almost motionless, shoulders heavy, hands never far from their belts. The fire was merely an excuse to remain together. Their real task was listening to the darkness. They spoke rarely, exchanging brief whispers that vanished among the crackling wood and the damp echoes of the station.

The firelight carved harsh shadows across their faces. Hollow cheeks. Yellowed skin. Eyes sunk deep into their sockets. Their uniforms were dirty and threadbare, the remains of old insignia barely visible, yet their vigilance remained intact. Not in their weapons. In their posture. In the way every movement seemed prepared for something that might emerge from the tunnel at any moment.

One of them, an older man, looked up as Harvey approached. His back was bent, and a thick beard concealed most of his mouth.

"Evening, Harvey."

"Can't sleep again?"

The man's voice was rough with age, but clear enough. There was no mockery in it, only the weariness of someone who had spent too many years staring into darkness and getting no answers back.

Harvey stepped closer to the fire.

"Evening."

The word came out heavily, as though the silence around them had never been made for human voices.

"I can't sleep. Adrian and Mason should've been back hours ago. I've tried not to think about it, but something doesn't add up."

Nobody answered at once.

The firewood crackled softly. The silence that followed was not indifference. They felt it too. The absence already hung over the station like the damp in the walls.

Adam's voice returned to Harvey's mind, precise and cold.

"Don't attract attention. You're on a strictly confidential mission. Trust no one."

He knew he should keep quiet.

But sometimes a single sentence spoken beside a fire was enough to change the shape of a silence.

One of the customs guards, a younger man, stirred a pot hanging above the flames. He looked up at Harvey without any urgency.

"Harvey, you're talking as if the Tube went quiet overnight. You've lived down here too long not to know how things work. Haven't you heard what happened at Canada Water?"

His tone was calm, yet the exhaustion behind it cut deeper than hostility would have.

Harvey did not answer straight away. He bit lightly at his lip and watched the flames. Cold air drifted from a side passage, carrying the smell of wet stone and rust. It slipped through his clothes and chilled the back of his neck.

The guards were waiting for the mushroom tea.

The pot simmered gently over the fire, spreading a bitter smell through the station's damp air. Nobody treated it like a luxury. It was simply one of the few things that helped keep a man's mind occupied during long nights on watch.

The old man ran a hand through his beard and looked at Harvey again.

"Their disappearance might actually be connected to Canada Water. Something happened there a few hours ago."

Harvey felt his stomach tighten.

The station's name seemed tied directly to his mission, even if nobody was saying it openly yet. He dragged a wooden crate closer to the fire and sat down.

He had known these men for years. He knew their voices, their silences, the way they avoided certain subjects when things started going wrong.

Which was exactly why he understood that the situation was worse than they wanted to admit.

"Something happened at Canada Water a few hours ago. We don't know exactly what. There was gunfire, that's all we know. Then everything stopped. Too suddenly. A lot of people forced open the blast gate and headed up to the surface. Word is they ran through the ruins towards Tower Gateway, looking for another way into the network. Others disappeared into the side tunnels. One trader reckoned some of them made it as far as Bermondsey."

The man paused and rubbed his hands together slowly, not because of the cold, but as though he were trying to scrub something from his skin.

"Don't know if he was telling the truth. We never got the chance to verify any of it afterwards."

Harvey remained silent.

His jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

Gunfire at Canada Water.

Too close.

He fixed his gaze on the flames. The firelight carved shifting red shadows across his face. Instantly, one name surfaced in his mind.

Salim al-Kadir.

Or perhaps something else.

Something worse.

If it had already begun, they were late.

Salim al-Kadir had been issuing warnings for months. Some called him a fanatic. Others believed he was the only man who truly understood what was moving through the western reaches of the Tube. Harvey had never met him. He knew the name only through messengers and rumours passed between stations. Yet lately those warnings kept surfacing in conversations more and more often.

The war between stations no longer felt like a distant threat.

Maybe it had already started.

Or maybe this was no longer about people.

Or maybe this was no longer about people. The thought of the deforms slipped coldly through his mind. If the panic at Canada Water had started because of them, then Adrian and Mason had already entered a tunnel from which nobody returned unchanged.

Harvey looked beyond the fire into the darkness. Without realising it, his hand had drifted close to his rifle.

The tunnel appeared still enough, but underground nothing stayed quiet for long.

A faint sound echoed somewhere in the depths. Water, perhaps. An echo. Or something else. Nobody spoke.

The old man held out a stained plastic cup with a chipped rim. The tea inside was almost black, steam rising faintly into the cold station air. Harvey studied it for a few seconds before taking it. Out of habit, he turned it towards the light, noticing a fine crack along one side and old dirt embedded in the plastic.

In another life he would have said something. A dry remark. A sarcastic comment.

Instead he simply held the cup between his hands and let the warmth seep into his fingers.

The fire crackled softly between them.

The man who had handed him the tea was called Mark Redford. Before the Collapse he had worked as a train operations inspector. His face was gaunt and grey, his deep-set eyes carrying the tired clarity of someone who had seen too much and expected nothing good from tomorrow.

Beside him sat Yusuf Baran, tall and lean, his skin darkened by years spent breathing the damp air of the stations. He spoke rarely, and when he did the others listened.

Stanislaw Kowalski kept his hands close to the fire. His round spectacles were forever sliding down his nose, and his oversized uniform hung from him like it had been draped over a skeleton. Even after all these years in the Tube, English still sat awkwardly on his tongue.

The last was Kwame Okoye. Harvey noticed the crescent-shaped scar on his forearm again, pale beneath the firelight. A deform had torn into him at Euston years earlier. Ever

since then, Kwame slept with one hand on his weapon and woke at the slightest sound from the tunnels.

The fire continued to burn quietly between them. For a few moments nobody spoke. The station seemed suspended in a fragile stillness, as though the entire Tube were listening to something drawing steadily closer through the dark.

"Here you go, Harvey," Mark said, holding out the cup again. A thin ribbon of steam rose from the almost black liquid and disappeared into the heavy air. "Might help you get some sleep."

He asked nothing more. He had simply watched Harvey a fraction too long, long enough to notice the exhaustion hidden beneath his calm expression and then decided not to push.

Harvey took the cup without replying immediately. He blew gently across the surface and looked up at them, at faces worn down by years, smoke and lack of sleep. Men who no longer needed introductions.

"And you believed him?" The pause was brief. "When did you hear about it?"

Yusuf answered first, his voice low. "Not long ago." Harvey respected Yusuf for precisely that reason. He never spoke more than he had to. He didn't make assumptions, and he never tried to impress anyone. In the Tube, men like that had become rare.

The tea was bitter, with a faint metallic edge, but its warmth spread slowly through his stomach and chest. Underground, nobody drank for flavour anymore. Only the effect mattered, the brief illusion that the cold had been pushed a little further from the bones. Tea bags had become difficult to find. Most came from abandoned warehouses or forgotten rooms on the surface, brought back by the few people who still ventured above and were lucky enough to return. In many stations, they had become a form of currency. Harvey watched Yusuf drink directly from the cup, unhurried, not even blinking at the heat. He had never managed that himself. Every time, he found himself blowing across the surface first.

Stanislaw cleared his throat. "When I asked him what had happened, his face changed straight away. He didn't look frightened. More like... drained. He said he'd come from Waterloo and had passed through Canada Water just as the shooting started."

Harvey remained still. "People started running in every direction. Nobody knew what was happening. Children, old people, traders, all of them pushing towards the blast gate as if the tunnels were on fire. Some forced their way to the surface and disappeared into the blizzard heading east. Others were shouting that the lines weren't safe anymore. That something was moving through the stations."

Stanislaw stretched his hands towards the fire. "He used the chaos to get through customs before the checks began. Then he ran all the way here."

Harvey held the cup close to his mouth without drinking. "Interesting." The word came out quietly, more for himself than for anyone else. Gunfire. People fleeing east. Canada Water. Canary Wharf. The details were beginning to fit together in his mind, forming a shape he could not yet fully see but could no longer ignore.

A chill crept up his spine, not from the air. The tea was still warming his hands. For a moment he saw the tunnels as a living map. Blast doors. Abandoned passages. Checkpoints. Crowds driven by panic towards any place that still promised order. He knew better than most how little hope was worth in the Tube.

Mark lowered his voice.

"If you ask me, it starts in the North-West. Something's been happening out there for a while now." Harvey listened without interrupting.

"Those areas are falling apart fast," Yusuf said. "Bond Street. Marylebone. Paddington. Even Acton Town and Edgware. Traders disappear. People go in and never come back. And the ones who do..." He took a slow sip before continuing. "They're fucking different."

The fire crackled softly.

"Some say they're being stopped and forced to pay huge tolls. Unofficial ones. Armed soldiers. Refuse, and you never reach the next station." Another crack from the fire. "It doesn't feel like famine," Yusuf said. "Or chaos. It feels organised."

Harvey did not blink. Things were starting to make sense in a way he disliked more and more with every passing second.

Yusuf sighed quietly. The bitterness in his voice carried more weight than anger.

"And it's not just about tolls or disorder. The North-West changed a long time ago. People there live by different rules. They don't negotiate. They don't talk. They keep their stations sealed off like enclaves cut away from the rest of the Tube."

His gaze remained fixed on the flames.

"There's order there. Just not the kind we know. They look at us as if we're weak. As if we're something left behind. And they're moving forward, station by station." He paused briefly. "If I had to name one place where it started, I'd say King's Cross St. Pancras. After that, the rest followed."

The fire snapped between them.

"It's not about trade anymore. They want control. One system. Everyone else either falls in line or disappears." His voice never rose, which somehow made the words heavier. "What worries me is that most people choose to ignore it."

Harvey held the cup against his chest without speaking. He could feel fear and truth beginning to merge into the same oppressive silence.

Kwame spoke without raising his voice.

"We can't keep pretending we don't see it. Something's moving in the North. Not just through the stations. Through people." He paused, searching for the right words. "The atmosphere's changing, mate. You feel it in the way people look at each other. In the disappearances. In the silences that follow every transport arriving from those areas."

Harvey listened.

"We've all heard the rumours. Orders coming from the North. Groups that don't answer to anyone in Green Park anymore. No goods coming through. No scouts travelling. Nobody explaining anything." Kwame lowered his eyes to the fire. "How many traders from the west have reached us in the last few years? Hardly any. And our own people have been told not to enter certain areas."

He looked back at Harvey. "People talk about meetings held without the other stations. About a west that wants to break away from the network altogether." Harvey remained silent.

What he was hearing matched Stewart's warnings too closely to dismiss.

"When was the last time you were out there?" Kwame asked.

Harvey touched the rim of the cup to his lips without drinking.

"Lancaster Gate. Nearly a year ago. It was hard getting in and even harder getting back out. Haven't tried since." His eyes drifted to the fire. "I've heard the same rumours as the rest of you. But rumours spread faster than truth in the Tube."

Kwame nodded almost imperceptibly.

"In twenty-five years, I've only been West once. The people there..." He shook his head slightly. "They barely spoke. Looked at you as if they were hiding something you weren't supposed to see." The firelight flickered across the blackened metal of the pot. "Maybe we should've paid more attention back then," he continued. "If something's being prepared out there, we'll be the last to know."

Nobody answered. Mark Redford sat motionless, one hand resting on his knee. Stanislaw stared at the dirty journal in his lap without writing. Yusuf leaned against the rusted wall, absently running his fingers over the amulet hanging around his neck. Around them, the station seemed suspended in a weariness without end. Steam rose slowly from the old pot and vanished into the heavy air thick with damp, corroded metal and the sour smell of boiled mushrooms. Every so often a stale draught drifted from the tunnel, like the breath of something that had rotted too long beneath the city.

Harvey rose slowly and looked beyond the weak circle of firelight. Beyond it, the Tube began again. Miles of wet tunnels. Checkpoints. Isolated stations. People continuing to live beneath London without knowing how much longer everything could hold together before it finally gave way. The customs guards remained gathered around the fire, their faces cut by shifting shadows, their eyes fixed somewhere beyond the station walls. When the flames eventually died, darkness would not be the problem. They had lived with darkness for years. What came afterwards was far harder to control.

Harvey took another sip of tea and set the cup beside his boots.

"Even so, I don't see the connection between Canada Water and Adrian and Mason being late. They'd have had no reason to go anywhere near it. Adam gave them a clear route, and neither of them was the sort to ignore orders."

The others kept their eyes on the fire.

"And how do we know that man was telling the truth?" Harvey continued. "For all we know, he wasn't a trader at all. Maybe he just wanted to see how quickly we'd panic." He rested his elbows on his knees.

"It's not the first time someone's come through with stories about Canada Water or Bermondsey, Harvey continued. Last time the station wasted half a day chasing shadows through the tunnels."

Stanislaw kept his eyes lowered, but Yusuf tilted his head slightly, silently acknowledging that Harvey had a point.

"The North and the West are close enough for us to feel the pressure," Harvey said more quietly. "But too far away for us to know what's true and what isn't. Especially when the rumours arrive without a scrap of proof."

The words lingered between them.

Mark was the first to break the silence.

"And if they did end up there? I've heard they were supposed to pass through a neighbouring station before heading back."

Harvey watched the flames for a few seconds before replying.

"Adrian told me the route before he left. He was calm. Didn't seem like anything had changed."

His voice dropped almost to a murmur.

"He only said he wanted to speak to Adam first."

That was all.

The fire crackled softly between them, and Harvey felt the weight of guilt settling on his chest again. Maybe he should have asked more questions. Maybe he should have stopped them.

Now it was too late for that.

The platform felt narrower than before, as though the station itself were pushing them towards a decision nobody wanted to voice. Harvey still sat on the wooden crate, back straight, eyes fixed on the flames, but his thoughts were already elsewhere.

He had to reach Green Park and deliver the document.

He knew that.

But there was something else weighing on him, something heavier than the order itself. The feeling that Adrian and Mason were still somewhere in the tunnels, and that every wasted minute pushed them further into a place from which there might be no return.

His hand drifted to the inside pocket of his coat.

The document was still there.

Safe.

Nothing else felt safe anymore.

Mark tried to ease the tension hanging over the fire.

"Maybe the bloke exaggerated," he said. "Seemed a bit drunk to me, if I'm honest. I'd rather believe Adrian and Mason will turn up soon and this was all just panic."

Nobody answered.

The tunnels swallowed words as quickly as they swallowed light.

"Let's hope so," Harvey murmured.

His voice carried no real conviction.

He rose slowly and stretched his stiff shoulders.

"Thanks for the tea."

A quick glance at his watch.

"I should get moving."

Nobody told him to be careful. In the Tube, words like that had become meaningless years ago.

Mark's eyes shifted towards the rucksack beside the crate.

"With all that gear, you don't look like a man who's only heading to the end of the platform."

Harvey adjusted the rifle on his shoulder.

"Just checking a station further down the line. Nothing complicated. Then I'll come back and sleep for twelve hours."

The answer came a little too quickly to sound entirely truthful, but Mark let it go. He leaned forward again and returned his attention to the fire, which was already beginning to die down.

Harvey lifted the rucksack and swung it onto his shoulder with the ease of long practice. The rifle remained secured along the side, visible enough to anyone who knew where to look. He wasn't trying to hide it.

Nor was he showing it off.

The customs guards said nothing. They had known him too long to waste time asking pointless questions. Or perhaps they were simply too tired for truths they didn't want spoken aloud.

Officially, Harvey was heading for Canary Wharf. In reality, his destination was Green Park.

Towards the document hidden beneath his coat, and the meeting Adam had ordered him to see through to the end.

Adam's voice returned once more, clear and insistent.

"The document goes directly to the President. No one else opens it. Not even you."

Mark watched him for a few moments before briefly touching his shoulder.

"I hope you find Adrian and Mason. But watch yourself in those tunnels. If you hear something behind you, keep walking. You don't want to end up like that lunatic who nearly burst into customs screaming his head off."

A short laugh passed between the others, dry and tired, vanishing almost immediately into the heavy station air.

Harvey managed the faintest hint of a smile.

Instinctively, he touched the rifle secured behind his rucksack, just enough to reassure himself it was still there. Then he took out his head torch, checked the switch and fastened it around his forehead. The movements were precise and automatic, repeated too many times to contain any hesitation.

There was nothing left to say. He headed into the tunnel without another word, watching as the firelight behind him began to shrink and retreat into the distance, eventually becoming little more than a reddish flicker swallowed by the absolute darkness of the Tube.

Harvey switched on the torch.

The narrow beam cut through the blackness, revealing the damp walls of the Jubilee tunnel, crumbling concrete, cables protruding from the walls and water trickling through cracks. Each footstep echoed dully across the filthy rails before being consumed by the dark. The air smelled of rust, mould and old damp, and the last traces of warmth from the fire vanished within a few yards.

The document pressed against his chest beneath the layers of his coat.

And the thought of Adrian and Mason kept returning, relentless and unanswered, as though the tunnels had swallowed them completely.

Ahead of him, the darkness appeared still, but Harvey knew better. In the Tube, silence never meant safety.

The further he went, the heavier the air became, almost stagnant, as though nobody had passed through the tunnel for a very long time. Dampness clung to his skin, seeping through his sleeves, his collar, every seam of his clothing. The cold did not come from draughts. It came directly from the waterlogged walls, passing through the fabric and settling slowly into his bones.

He could hear nothing except his own footsteps.

The echo pulsed steadily between the narrow tunnel walls, mechanical and hollow, like a clock that kept ticking in a place where time no longer mattered. Harvey walked on at an unhurried pace, his head torch casting a weak, trembling light across the wet concrete, carrying the growing sense that the choice he had made had already begun demanding its price.

The beam broke against exposed cables, rusted supports and dark pools of standing water, throwing restless shadows across the walls. If he watched them for too long, they began to take shape. Harvey never gave them that chance. In the Tube, the things you ignored were sometimes less dangerous than the things you studied too closely.

He had passed through this tunnel countless times. So often that he no longer needed landmarks. Every bend, every strand of copper pulled from its insulation, every patch of condensation and faded marking had become part of a map that no longer existed on paper, only in his steps, his instincts and the memory of his body.

The darkness had not frightened him for years, not because he had conquered it, but because he had learned to live alongside it. He felt it around him, almost against his skin, constant and patient, like an old presence that no longer needed to threaten anyone. Sometimes he wondered whether he still carried a light to see the way ahead or simply to convince himself that the world still existed beyond the blackness.

Somewhere ahead, beyond the long curve of the tunnel, lay Canary Wharf. Adrian and Mason had passed this way. Perhaps they were still alive. Perhaps they were already dead. The thought changed nothing. Harvey adjusted the strap of his rucksack and continued forward without slowing. Behind him, North Greenwich disappeared into the darkness. Ahead, only the tunnel remained. And the tunnel never gave answers freely.