

Chapter 3: No Triumph. Only Return.

Without slowing, he adjusted the torch. The beam lifted slightly, and the rhythm of his footsteps pushed his thoughts backwards, towards another time, another tunnel and another Harvey.

He had been eighteen then, carrying his rifle with the stiffness of a recruit who still believed in order and in the idea that the Underground could be controlled.

There had been seven of them at the start: boys from North Greenwich, wearing uniforms too large for them and carrying enough hope to believe the stations could become fortresses, not refuges. After a few weeks, only four remained. Training meant no speeches. No ceremonies. Only cold filthy water, drills repeated until the body moved before the mind, smoke, bare hands closing wounds, and gunfire in confined spaces where each shot struck the skull like a crowbar. The instructors never raised their voices. That was why every order stayed with you: "Don't shoot unless you have to. Don't shoot if you want to stay alive." It was not advice. It was law.

Then came practical exercises in the blind sector of North Greenwich, where ruptured pipes spat black steam across the tracks and the targets were charcoal stains on damp walls. Ammunition came from salvaged cartridges, warped and unreliable. The explosions left their marks on people. That was where they learned the Tube's simplest truth: fear was not what killed first; the noise it made did. Years later, when Harvey became a scout and wore the mask, children followed him with the same wide-eyed stare. Not because he had saved anyone. He had never had that kind of power. Because he walked upright and came back from places where others did not.

In their world, that was enough to make a man seem invincible. In the present tunnel, Harvey kept the same measured pace. He knew what fear did once you started running. It made you noisy. Chaotic. Predictable. Of the original seven recruits, only two survived: Harvey and a quiet boy with quick movements and eyes that rarely blinked. The others had vanished through small mistakes, decisions made too early or a second too late. It had never been a competition. Only a slow process of selection. When only the two of them remained, the final protocol changed. The individual test became a joint mission through the tunnel between North Greenwich and Canary Wharf, the same tunnel Harvey was walking through now.

He remembered the metal beams hanging too low, like rusted ribs overhead. The walls blackened by damp and mould. The air so thick it seemed to remain in the lungs after every breath.

Even then, the tunnel had felt alive. And now, after all these years, it did not feel any deader. Only hungrier.

There was no room for mistakes in tunnels like these. No room for weakness either.

Underground, hesitation always surfaced eventually, like an old wound reopening without warning.

There were only two of them, yet the echo of their footsteps multiplied through the confined passage. Sometimes it came from ahead. Sometimes from the side. Sometimes so close it felt as though someone else were walking beside them, invisible, keeping perfect pace.

They reached the bottom of the metal stairway at Canary Wharf, where the sealed blast door blocked access to the surface.

Beyond that point there would be no instructor.

No repeated orders over their shoulders.

Only cold steel and the dense silence underground.

Harvey checked his mask and switched on his head torch. The beam struggled through the dust hanging in the air, forcing the outlines of the tunnel into view for a moment before darkness swallowed them again.

The other boy held the map open between gloved hands.

The paper was damp, transparent around the edges, but the surface route had been drawn with obsessive precision. Streets. Abandoned buildings. Collapsed walkways. Access points. Areas marked with black symbols that looked less like navigation notes and more like warnings left by someone who had already seen what waited there.

The goal lay inside an abandoned building on the surface in Canary Wharf, a military rucksack hidden there days earlier.

On paper, the mission looked simple. In reality, distance was not the problem. The journey was. The tunnels were only the beginning.

To return, they would have to cross the surface and re-enter through the blast gate at North Greenwich.

The area had been dangerous long before the stations began isolating themselves. Stories circulated about mercenaries hiding in abandoned Docklands stations, settlements no longer marked on Tube maps, groups that answered to nobody. Conflicts erupted without warning among ruined buildings, collapsed walkways and flooded corridors.

And then there were the other signs.

The ones nobody discussed openly.

Harvey tightened the belt of his tactical vest and lowered his eyes towards the blast door, ready to go out.

“Don’t know about you,” he said through the mask filter, “but I’ve been waiting for this moment for years. To see London again with my own eyes. Not maps. Not stories.”

The other boy did not answer.

Behind the visor, his eyes trembled slightly.

It was not panic. Only that cold, lucid fear that appeared before every real mission.

A sentry leaning against the railing watched them without intervening. He was old, his skin dry and weathered, his eyes hollowed by too many nights spent underground.

“Too young for this,” he muttered eventually. “Shouldn’t be going up there on their own.”

Nobody replied. Harvey stood staring at the heavy hatch of corroded steel. Rust had spread across its edges like a disease, and the locking bars looked as though time itself had welded them into place. Beyond it was no longer the Tube, nor any sense of control, not even the illusion of it. Beyond it lay the city, or whatever had survived of it.

Another veteran approached them slowly, his shoulders sagging beneath years of service and his face coated in old dust. The brief smile he offered looked less like encouragement than recognition as he gave a short nod.

“You’ll be all right, lads. You’re ready. Just don’t forget what you’ve been taught. Good luck.”

Harvey returned the gesture automatically, then the blast door began to open.

The metal groaned as if the tunnel itself objected. A wave of heavy air rolled into the passage: rot, damp dust and something older, impossible to name. It slipped through the filters and settled in the stomach. Their torches needed several seconds to find shapes beyond the doorway. Frozen mist shredded the beams into trembling ribbons. It was December, and the cold moved between the buildings with patient cruelty. The city did not look abandoned. It looked drained.

Harvey took a deep breath out of instinct, though the mask returned nothing but the same cold filtered air. Beside him, his companion’s shoulder still trembled slightly, but he had not taken a step back.

The storm hit them the moment they emerged between the buildings. Without warning. As though the city itself had rejected them.

Ahead lay the abandoned docks around West India Quay: overturned containers, shattered walkways, cranes fading into the blizzard. Beyond them, One Canada Square rose through snow and fog, hollowed by years of wind, ice and decay.

Heavy flakes hammered against their visors. Dust and ice moved with them, turning the world into dirty white and grey. Harvey did not look for landmarks. There were none left. Only the storm, the noise and the ruins.

“We’ve got a job to do,” Harvey said through the mask.

The wind swallowed his voice, but the other scout heard him and nodded. They pressed on through what had once been Canary Wharf, every step a struggle against cold that seemed determined to stop them breathing.

The other boy’s back shook beneath his gear. Not only from the temperature. Harvey recognised the feeling: the shock of seeing the surface and understanding that no underground training could prepare you for it.

The streets had vanished beneath rubble, broken beams and frozen cables. Wind screamed through the ruins. Towers leaned above them, empty and stubborn, as if the financial district had not yet understood it was dead.

Cars appeared through the snow as rusted shells trapped in ice. Craters scarred the road, exposing black earth beneath.

And yet, now and then, fragments remained almost untouched: a car parked perfectly between other wrecks, a shopfront left intact, a traffic light still hanging above a dead junction. For a moment, it was possible to believe the city might wake again. Then the silence destroyed the illusion.

Harvey paused for a second and looked towards the pavement on his right.

Years ago, his mother had held his hand there and pointed out a colourful advertisement fixed to the wall of a building. He remembered his own laughter more clearly than the advert itself.

Now nothing remained. Only snow, concrete, and wind. The memory passed through him without offering warmth, like an old object uncovered beneath ruins.

Five years had passed since the Collapse, and this was only the second time Harvey had set foot on the surface. But this was no exercise. There was no controlled observation, no recovery team nearby. The city had become something else entirely, a frozen ruin carrying the traces of those who had built it and then destroyed it.

For a while Harvey walked in silence, head lowered against the storm.

“Incredible,” he muttered eventually. “How quickly people can destroy everything.”

The other scout did not answer. He simply lowered his gaze and kept moving.

Harvey clenched his fists to force feeling back into his fingers and carried on at the same steady pace. The other boy stayed close behind.

“We need to stay sharp, Harvey,” he said between heavy breaths. “I don’t want anything catching us off guard. Not deforms. Not anything else.”

Harvey did not reply.

But the thought remained with him, cold and clear.

On the surface, there was no room for mistakes.

The world had become a white, shapeless wasteland, as though the city had frozen at the moment of its final breath.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared now,” Harvey said. The trace of irony in his voice was too tired to resemble a smile. “You wanted to be a scout, didn’t you? If you want to turn back, turn back. I’m carrying on.”

The words hung between them, heavy and cold, carried by the wind through the frozen ruins. It was not a challenge. Nor a criticism. Only the raw form of a thought that had been eating at him ever since they emerged onto the surface.

That sooner or later he would be left alone.

"I'm not going anywhere," the other scout replied without slowing. His back straightened instinctively beneath his gear. "I didn't fight to earn this rifle just to throw it away at the first blizzard."

That was all. No explanation. No heroics.

Harvey gave a brief nod and continued forward. The tension that had settled in his stomach eased slightly. He was not alone. Not yet.

They pressed deeper into the frozen ruins, crossing cracked roads, piles of rubble and abandoned vehicles buried beneath dirty snow. The wind drove flurries between the ruined buildings, and every corner seemed dark enough to conceal something alive.

Harvey gripped the map tightly; if he lost it, they were lost too. The other scout followed a few paces behind, rifle raised, eyes constantly moving across shattered windows, narrow passages, and the shadows between the ruins.

The city was silent, but there was nothing peaceful in it. Night had settled over Canary Wharf, and a dirty trace of moonlight forced its way through the clouds. The sickly glow lay across shattered towers and cracked facades, turning the district into a photograph ruined by damp and frost. Empty windows stared down without reflecting anything back.

The wind came in short, violent bursts, pushing the shadows of the ruins back and forth across the frozen roads. The air smelled of oxidised metal, stagnant water and broken concrete, the smell of a city that had died slowly. Somewhere in the darkness came a sharp crack, followed by a muffled echo, as though an ageing structure had finally given way between the buildings.

Nothing moved, yet Harvey could not shake the feeling that the city was watching them. Every step demanded attention. Their shoulders stayed tense. Their eyes never lingered in one place for long. Out here, night concealed more than darkness.

Roughly a hundred and fifty yards ahead, the building rose from the fractured asphalt near the junction of Canada Square and Upper Bank Street. Its ruined facade and shattered floors looked like a rib protruding from the city's corpse. Harvey recognised it at once. Half-buried in dirty snow near the entrance lay a collapsed sign. The worn letters were still barely visible: HSBC.

Years earlier, the place had belonged to a world that believed it could control everything, from money to the future itself. Now it was a shell of glass and concrete, isolated among the ruins around Canary Wharf station and the twisted remains of the district's bridges. The cracked walls still stood. In a city where so much had fallen, that felt unnatural.

Neither spoke. They exchanged a brief glance through their mask visors. There was no courage in either face. No hope.

Only the acceptance that from here, things could go in any direction.

The wind slipped through the building's rusting framework with a long, broken whistle. Somewhere above them, metal vibrated faintly, like a warning nobody could translate.

The closer they came, the heavier and more hostile the air felt.

Every footstep crunched through the thin layer of snow, and in the absolute silence of the district the sound felt almost violent.

The mission had been simple on paper. Now it had weight. It pressed into every movement, every breath through the mask.

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

The door, once polished stainless steel, had become a slab of rust locked inside its own frame. When they forced it open, the long, damp screech spread through the ruins like a wound torn into the silence.

Both men instinctively raised their rifles.

The darkness inside had substance. It was more than the absence of light. It felt sealed, compact, almost physical, as though the air itself refused to let people move deeper inside.

They stepped into a long, narrow corridor. The echo of their boots struck the walls and at once returned from impossible directions.

Doors hung crookedly on either side. Some had been torn completely free. Others remained jammed half-open. The intact ones bore dark stains hardened into the metal and wood. Old blood. Silent blood.

The building did not feel abandoned. It felt interrupted, as though people had vanished halfway through a movement they never finished.

The remains of an ordered world had been suspended inside chaos. Open drawers. Fallen panels. Overturned chairs. Papers stuck to the damp floor.

Only the money had disappeared long ago, taken over the years by desperate hands that had long since stopped believing it could buy anything at all.

They moved forward slowly, without speaking. Every step was measured. Every breath emerged through the masks with a short metallic hiss, like a faulty machine.

The air grew heavier with each yard, thick with the sour smell of rust, mould and old blood in the walls. It was not the smell of the surface. It came from deeper inside the building, from places where time had stopped years ago.

The walls, once covered with white panels and frosted glass, were now stained and cracked. Symbols had been drawn across them in something chestnut brown and hardened. Chaotic markings rushed and unfinished, as though the hand that created them had disappeared before the work was done.

Dust coated the granite floor, the stainless-steel railings and the edges of the suspended ceiling like dead skin. Their torches did not conquer the darkness. They pushed it back a few paces. Shadows stretched and twisted across the walls, trembling figures that refused to disappear. They passed what had once been a boardroom. The metal door hung from a single hinge. Harvey glanced inside. Reinforced glass tables were smashed. Chairs lay broken and overturned. Long streaks of blood climbed the walls towards the ceiling. Nothing remained intact. Everything spoke of violence. Fast violence. Violence without witnesses. They kept moving.

A sudden rustle made both rifles rise at once. The torch beams cut through the darkness and found only a large rat, its fur wet, its eyes reflecting the light with an unnatural gleam. It vanished through a crack before either man could relax. After that sound, the silence changed. It no longer felt empty. It felt attentive.

The corridor continued ahead. After a few more steps, a sweet, rotting smell seeped through the stale air. Harvey recognised it immediately. The smell death leaves behind. His breathing quickened, misting the inside of his visor. Not from panic. From memory. The body remembered before the mind accepted.

Ahead stood a heavy iron door warped by moisture and time. The lower section had buckled, and deep scratches scored the metal: long, desperate marks gouged in haste. Harvey stopped in front of it. He understood before thought caught up. Beyond that door there was more than ruin. He adjusted the torch on his forehead. Together they pushed. The door opened slowly.

Metal screamed in protest, a wet, painful sound that travelled through the building. The room beyond was colder than the corridor, denser. The silence inside did not feel like peace. It felt like absence.

Their breathing remained steady only through discipline.

"The corridor on the right," Harvey said quietly. "According to the map, that's where the rucksack is."

He lifted the crumpled plan.

His hand trembled imperceptibly.

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

There was no humour left between them now, and certainly no bravado.

They continued with measured steps, rifles raised, fingers resting against the triggers exactly as they had been taught. The corridor seemed to narrow with every yard. The walls grew wetter, closer. The air pressed against their chests from the inside. According to the map, they were at the marked location.

But it wasn't the rucksack that stopped them.

A sound drifted through the darkness.

A short, strangled gasp, as though something were trying to breathe through lungs filled with blood. It was neither human nor animal. It belonged somewhere between them, broken and wrong.

Both men froze against the wall. Their coats brushed mould spreading across the concrete like an old infection. Breathing became shallow inside their masks. Sweat gathered beneath their gloves. Fear was no longer an idea. It had moved into muscle, skin and nerve.

Their torch beams pushed weakly into the darkness, throwing shifting shadows across damp walls and broken glass. In the narrow angles of the corridor, the shadows seemed to linger a fraction too long before moving again.

Harvey stood closest to the corner.

He knew there was no point delaying any longer, yet his body refused to obey. A constant tremor ran from his knees to his shoulders. For a brief second, he closed his eyes, forcing back the paralysis tightening around his chest. Then he moved forward.

Not because he was brave. Because instinct left him no choice.

His companion lifted a hand, trying to stop him, but Harvey's head torch had already cast a pale patch of light across the wall beyond the corner. In a place like this, light was not guidance. It was a signal.

Presence.

A faint hiss escaped the other scout's throat and vanished into the stale air.

Harvey edged forward until his shoulder touched the corner and slowly raised his head.

For a moment everything contracted into a single heartbeat.

The deform crouched in the corridor ahead.

Its black, glistening skin looked stretched across a body built according to no recognisable anatomy, a wet membrane pulled over something that had never been human. Light slid strangely across its surface. Its limbs twisted at impossible angles. Long curved claws hung close to the floor without touching it.

The proportions of its head changed every time Harvey looked at it. Too broad from one angle, too narrow from another.

The neck remained perfectly still.

Yet Harvey understood at once that the creature had sensed him; not seen him but sensed him.

Its breathing filled the corridor.

A deep, wet rattling dragged through something diseased, as though its own body rejected every breath and kept living out of spite. The sound did not remain in the air. Harvey felt it in his ribs, his stomach and the base of his skull.

He could not move. Every story told around station fires, every warning whispered through the Tube, every rumour passed between scouts collapsed in that instant. Nothing prepared anyone for the reality.

It was not a legend. It was there, alive and breathing in the darkness beside the rucksack they had come to retrieve. The rucksack lay only a few yards away, close enough to reach within seconds. The distance felt impossible because of what guarded it. The deform's eyes reflected the torchlight incorrectly. Wet. Swollen. Empty of anything recognisably human. No hatred. No animal instinct. Only a living emptiness staring back. Very slowly, Harvey began to retreat, every inch negotiated with death.

The torch shifted and cast a brief flash across the wall. His blood turned cold. He could only hope it had not been enough. His heart hammered so violently it threatened to drown every other sound, and the rifle trembled in his hands. He did not want to fire. Not here. Not while there was still a chance of leaving alive. The cold wall pressed against his back. As he drew a controlled breath through the filter, he knew everything depended on the next movement. Survival was no longer training or tactics. It had been reduced to precision.

A few steps behind, his companion remained pressed against the wall like a shadow, trembling just as badly. They looked at one another through fogged visors. No words were needed. The truth had already settled between them. The deform was real. It was here. It was alive. When Harvey reached him, he leaned closer and whispered so quietly the words barely seemed to exist. "It's a deform... exactly like they said. Only worse. If we get this wrong, we're not getting out."

The other scout remained motionless for a moment before replying without taking his eyes from the corridor.

"We won't get it wrong." His voice stayed calm.

"Harvey, we've been through too much to fall apart now. We're not cowards. We've got rifles. We've got ammunition. If everything goes to hell, we shoot. Until then, we outsmart it."

There was no heroism in the words. He was not trying to inspire confidence, only to stay rational. Harvey gave the slightest nod. Both understood the same thing: a direct fight would mean death.

They began moving again, slowly enough that every movement felt deliberate. Keeping close to the wall, they lowered their torches and placed each boot carefully on the floor. Their breathing stayed controlled behind the filters. The rucksack was only a few steps away. The deform remained beside it. Harvey reached for the strap. At that exact moment, the creature turned its head. The movement came so suddenly it seemed disconnected from every natural law. Its neck twisted, and those swollen eyes fixed on them at once. The growl that followed sounded unlike anything alive: thick, wet, saturated with fluid and decay. It had known they were there all along.

The illusion shattered instantly. Both rifles came up on instinct, and the corridor erupted in gunfire. Muzzle flashes tore through the darkness in violent bursts of white light. Bullets hammered into walls, ricocheted from metal, and blasted concrete into the air. The rounds struck the deform. Its oily skin burst under the impacts. Black flesh tore away in glistening strips. It kept advancing.

It didn't scream. It didn't hesitate.

That same deep, diseased rattling continued to pour from its throat, like a machine that had broken long ago but refused to stop working.

Its claws sliced through the air.

Its body was coming apart beneath the gunfire, but every step seemed faster, more violent, more deliberate than the last.

Harvey felt the recoil pound through his shoulders and chest. Each round left the barrel with the force of pure survival. Beside him, the other scout fired in controlled bursts. There was nowhere left to retreat.

And still the deform kept coming.

Thick, dark blood sprayed from the creature's ribs. Chunks of flesh struck the floor and skidded across the granite, yet nothing slowed its advance. It no longer looked like a living thing. It looked like a will made flesh, driven forward by something far deeper than instinct.

And then Harvey saw its eyes.

Beyond the blood and spasms, there was something worse than the urge to kill. It wanted to erase. To strip everything back to the same emptiness from which it had emerged.

At that moment Harvey understood that the mission no longer mattered.

Only survival mattered.

His finger kept squeezing the trigger.

The deform staggered. For a fraction of a second it lost its balance. Then its body collapsed onto the granite with a wet, crushing impact. Its limbs twisted after the fall, twitching as though the body had not accepted death.

Then silence returned.

Neither could have said whether seconds or minutes had passed. Only their ragged breathing disturbed the corridor. Harvey lowered his rifle slowly. His companion did the same. Neither took his eyes off the creature. In their world, death was never assumed. It had to be confirmed.

They approached from opposite sides, rifles still ready. Thick, almost black blood seeped into the cracks in the floor. The oily sheen of the creature's skin was already beginning to fade. "It's dead," his companion said quietly, his voice trembling despite the effort to control it. Harvey said nothing. He nodded.

The adrenaline drained away, leaving a cold and heavy emptiness. His pulse still hammered in his temples. His hands trembled around the rifle. They retrieved the rucksack without ceremony. The object they had crossed half the city to find now hung between them, less like equipment than a sentence being carried home.

Neither spoke. There was nothing left worth saying. They simply turned towards the corridor and began the journey back. There was no victory in their footsteps. No triumph. Only return.

They left the building without looking back, passing the fallen deform as though it were something abandoned in a forgotten graveyard. In that world, whatever was left behind no longer belonged to anyone. What you carried away never truly left.

Both knew nobody back at the station would fully understand what they had seen. When they placed the rucksack beneath the dirty yellow lights of the refuge, people would think the mission had ended there. That they had returned with nothing more than the objective. But they were bringing back something else. Proof.

Proof that the whispers travelling through the tunnels were not stories told around station fires to keep children close to the walls. The deforms did not belong to the night. They were the night. And now the night had a face.

The city greeted them once more with its merciless cold. The wind no longer whistled through the ruins. It struck them. Heavy flakes and freezing rain had become needles of ice that worked through their clothing and bit directly into flesh. Every step felt like a negotiation with exhaustion, cold and the fear that still pulsed somewhere behind their eyes.

They walked shoulder to shoulder, two dark figures moving through the ruins of dead Canary Wharf. Neither spoke. Nothing remained that could be said without breaking something inside them.

Behind them, the city receded into the storm like a frozen carcass. Only the wind still seemed alive among the ruins.

Yet beneath the exhaustion something stubborn remained. Not hope. Not courage. Only the cold determination of men who had not yet been broken.

Walking had become mechanical, almost automatic. They could barely feel their hands. Their boots struck the frozen ground in a hollow rhythm that no longer seemed entirely connected to them.

Ahead, a grey shape slowly emerged through the blizzard.

The blast door of North Greenwich station rose from the concrete like an open scar in the body of London. It was no longer only a station. It was a border between the frozen ruins above and the controlled darkness of the Jubilee Line below. Above them stood skeletons of steel and glass. Below waited broken pipes, damp cables and walls that still kept people alive.

Home. Or the closest thing to home that remained for those who had seen what existed beyond the walls.

The storm hit them from the side, forcing their knees to buckle involuntarily, but they kept moving. A sentry spotted them first, and his shout was at once torn apart by the wind. More figures appeared in the opening. The blast door began to move, opening slowly with the deep metallic groan of machinery built for a world that no longer existed.

A pale-yellow light spilled out from within. Weak. Sickly. Alive. They descended into the Underground once more.

The station air hit them immediately, damp, heavy and familiar, thick with the smells of bodies, diesel and mould. It was not clean. It was not pleasant. But it was enclosed. Protected. Different from the world outside.

They did not look like victors as they stepped through the entrance.

They barely looked like survivors.

They were only two shadows returning from a place where people no longer belonged. The applause began hesitantly, brief and almost embarrassed, more an acknowledgement than a celebration.

Harvey heard it as though it were coming through a thick concrete wall as he stopped beside the platform and lowered the rucksack to the ground. Slowly he removed his mask, and the heavy station air flooded his lungs with familiar brutality.

"We made it back, Adrian," he said, his voice rough and strained.

He drew a long breath.

"We made it home."

Adrian stood there, filthy, exhausted and still on his feet. For a single moment North Greenwich ceased to be another dirty station on a map. It became the only place left in the world where coming back still meant something. The only thing they had left.