

The London Tube

Fragment from the journal of an unidentified scout, recovered from an abandoned sector of the Underground.

I no longer know how long I have been walking.

The air grows heavier with every step. My torch is dying. The beam has thinned to a pale circle on the brickwork ahead, and the dark keeps pressing against it, patient as water.

At first I told myself the sounds were ordinary things. Water in old pipes. Metal shrinking in the cold. My own footsteps coming back to me from the tunnel.

I was wrong.

There is something here.

I tried to explain it. Lack of oxygen. Exhaustion. Fear. But explanations do not last long down here. They break apart after enough hours in the dark.

There are howls somewhere ahead. Sometimes I catch movement at the edge of the light: shapes that seem almost human for a second, then fold themselves back into the tunnel.

I still have ammunition. Enough for anything made of flesh and bone.

But what use is a rifle when the torch goes out?

Every time I stop, the sounds stop with me.

Every time I move, they move too.

They are following me.

And now I can hear them breathing.

I do not know whether they are real, or whether this place has begun to take my mind apart piece by piece. I tell myself the air is bad. I tell myself fear distorts things.

The breathing is getting closer.

I want to run, but I cannot.

Something is approaching.

For the first time since entering this tunnel, I no longer feel as if I am searching for a way out.

I think something is searching for me.

Chapter 1: The Day of the Siren

Harvey Hunter woke slowly on the morning of 13 October 2013. Rain struck the windows of the block of flats in hard, uneven bursts. Wind moved through the courtyard below, shaking the bare branches until they scraped against one another like dry bones. The sound felt wrong for the hour, wrong for the city, wrong for childhood. It seemed to come from somewhere older than London, somewhere deeper, as if another time had torn itself open and let the weather go through.

He lay still for a moment, listening. Then he got up. The flat was cold. Sleep clung to him in patches, but the damp in the walls cut through it. He crossed the window and pressed his forehead against the glass. Outside, London had blurred into grey shapes and wet reflections. The sky sat low over the rooftops, heavy and flat, like a sheet of lead lowered over the city.

The rain washed everything and cleaned nothing.

"Morning," he muttered.

His mother's voice came from the kitchen, mixed with steam and the thin whistle of the kettle.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Not well. Not badly." Harvey rubbed his eyes and stepped into the kitchen. "The rain woke me."

His father sat at the table with both hands around a mug he had not drunk from. Alex was already there, wrapped in a thick jumper, small shoulders drawn up, eyes fixed on the edge of the table.

"Harvey," his father said, "are you coming today? Is your brother coming too?"

Harvey glanced at Alex. "I don't know. He doesn't really want to."

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

She turned from the counter. There was flour on one sleeve of her blouse and tiredness beneath her eyes.

"I can't. I have work, and I'm meeting someone after."

Alex did not argue. He only tightened his fingers around the table.

"I'll go," he said. "But I want to know I'm coming back."

Their father looked at him for a long second.

"Don't talk daft. There's no war here. We're taking the Tube, that's all."

Harvey watched Alex's face. There was no childish fear in it. Something quieter lived there, something that did not belong to a boy his age.

"We'll be careful," Harvey said.

Their father nodded once. "You know the rules."

"Yes, Dad."

Alex reached for Harvey's sleeve.

"I'll hold your hand the whole time."

"Then do it when I'm not driving the train, mate," their father said. Nobody smiled.

Their mother set two plates on the table.

"Did you hear the news?" she asked.

"About the alliance?" their father said.

"Yes."

The kettle clicked off. For a moment, that was the loudest sound in the room.

"It's worse than it looks," she said. "Relations have broken down. And when things break quietly, they rarely mend quietly."

Harvey did not understand all of it. He understood her voice.

"Does that mean war?" Alex asked.

Their father looked into his mug.

“Not yet.”

“But it can?”

“That is how these things begin. People stop trusting each other. They stop listening. Then one day everyone says the first shot came from the other side.”

“Will it reach here?”

“I hope not.” He said it too quickly.

The silence that followed seemed to settle into the chairs, the walls, the damp window.

“Why are you looking like that?” Harvey asked.

His father looked up. “Because I don’t know what happens next.”

“It sounds like a nightmare.”

“No,” his father said. “It’s reality arriving slowly.”

His mother touched the back of Alex’s chair.

“Eat. Get ready. Whatever comes, comes. We stay together.”

“Together,” Harvey said.

Alex repeated it, almost under his breath. Outside, taxis moved through the rain in greasy waves, wheels cutting through dark puddles. Headlights trembled across the wet road. London was not crying. It was holding its teeth together.

In the car, the boys sat without speaking. Their breath misted the glass. Their father watched the streets ahead with his hands locked together in his lap, too still for a man only going to work. Every turn made the morning feel narrower. Harvey looked at shopfronts, bus shelters, office windows, people under black umbrellas. Everything moved as it always had, yet none of it felt alive. It was as if the city had learned to continue without believing in itself.

Along Millennium Way, the taxi pulled over beneath a low grey sky. The pavements shone under the fading glow of streetlamps. Glass facades, polished shop windows, the steel lines of the bridges and walkways, a small cafe just opening, all of it looked ordered and clean. Nothing was damaged. Nothing had been abandoned. That made it worse.

In the distance, the O2 Arena rose pale and silent, perfect as a thing placed there by mistake. Their father paid the driver and stepped out. Rain struck his coat at once. He took both boys by the hand, not dramatically, not even consciously. The grip simply appeared, firm and familiar.

Then he led them towards North Greenwich. They descended underground. The station was crowded, but to Harvey it felt crowded with less people than with pressure. Footsteps, coats, wet hair, low voices, the hiss of brakes and the breath of ventilation merged into one industrial murmur. He could feel Alex’s hand in his own. Everything else moved unevenly, like a film slipping on its reel.

Inside the carriage, the air felt smaller. Nobody spoke more than necessary. People kept their eyes lowered, as if a single glance might begin an argument no one had the strength to finish. A woman held a child against her chest. An old man stroked the handle of a worn leather bag. A teenager stood by the door with headphones hanging silent around his neck.

Harvey shifted his weight as the train moved. At first, his father and Alex were only a few steps behind him. Then a man with a suitcase pushed between them. Someone else moved. A shoulder turned. The carriage swayed, and Harvey let himself drift towards the connecting door.

It was not a decision. Only a small movement to find air. He could still see them through the crowd. His father’s dark coat. Alex’s jumper. The pale shape of his brother’s face when the lights flickered.

Harvey touched the watch on his wrist and followed the seconds. The window trembled. The lights flickered again. Then the siren began. It was not a sound so much as a wound opening in the tunnel. A cold wail tore through concrete and metal and flesh, too loud to

belong to the train, too deep to belong to the station. It slipped under Harvey's skin before he understood he was hearing it.

The train froze for one fraction of a second. Then it stopped. Metal screamed. Bodies lurched. Someone fell. The silence broke at once into panic.

Voices rose around him, not words at first, only breath, curses, cries, the raw noise of people suddenly stripped of direction. A hand struck Harvey's shoulder. Another caught his arm. He closed his fingers around it by instinct, but the contact vanished in the crush.

"Harvey!"

His father's voice came from behind him, distant and torn apart by the siren.

"Dad!"

He tried to push back through the bodies. The crowd moved the other way.

"Alex!"

For one second he saw his brother's face between two coats. Then a woman stumbled, a man shouted, and the carriage doors opened into chaos. The crowd spilled onto the platform. Harvey was carried with it. He fought to turn around. Hands shoved him forward. Someone stepped on his foot. He slipped, caught himself, lost sight of the train, saw it again through smoke and rainwater dripping from the ceiling. His father was no longer visible. Alex was gone.

The world had split in a place too small for anyone to notice. He did not know how long passed. Seconds, perhaps minutes. At some point the train moved again, taking people with it, leaving others behind. Harvey did not understand until the doors closed and the carriages pulled away.

He lifted his eyes to the station board. London Bridge. The train disappeared into the tunnel. Harvey stood on the platform and watched it go. Around him, the station had become a living thing made of feet, smoke, sirens and screams. People ran without knowing where. Dust clung to wet coats. Announcements cracked through the speakers and collapsed into static. Somewhere, glass broke. Somewhere else, a child cried so hard the sound came out silent.

Harvey searched for his father, for Alex, for any face that could still belong to the morning. There was nothing. He stumbled, fell, rose again. At last he found a dark corner where the pressure of bodies thinned and lowered himself to the concrete. His palms pressed against the cold floor. His breathing came in broken bursts. He tried to pray and could not remember the shape of prayer.

His mother's voice returned to him. We stay together. The station shook. Sirens tore through the air. Harvey curled against the wall, a child inside a world collapsing in real time.

Twenty-five years later.

The two couriers had left North Greenwich more than four hours earlier. They had cleared the border point without fuss: password, seal, route, reason. The westward run should have been simple. North Greenwich to Canary Wharf and back. A short distance by the standards of the old city. A routine assignment, at least on paper.

Four hours changed routine into warning. In the Tube, delay had its own language. Ten minutes meant a blocked gate or a disputed password. Thirty meant mechanical trouble, injury, or a longer inspection. An hour brought men to the tunnel mouth with rifles and lamps.

Four hours meant absence had become an answer. The border point tightened around that answer. Four-armed guards faced the tunnel, uniforms damp, boots planted on the platform edge. They were no longer checking passage. They were holding a line.

Above the tracks, an improvised floodlight stuttered in the dark. It gave enough light for shapes, never enough for certainty. Power has become rare. Light, rarer still. Every figure approaching the west gate was stopped.

Password. Reason. Documents. Seal. No one passed without the full chain.

Underground, order survived through small procedures repeated with almost religious care. A missing document could start a fight. A wrong name could close a gate. A late courier could make an entire station listen to the dark. Harvey Hunter stood inside the suspended shelter above the platform and stared at the Rolex Submariner on his wrist.

The bezel was worn smooth at the edges. Thin scratches crossed the glass. He had found it years earlier in the ruins of a luxury shop near the old financial district, half buried beneath ash and rainwater. It still worked with impossible precision. He was not looking at the time.

He was listening to it. The second hand swept around the dial without hesitation. Nothing in it doubted. Nothing in it waited. Harvey rubbed his thumb against the strap. Sweat dampened his palm despite the cold.

Adrian should have been back. Mason should have been back. Every sound below became a possibility. A bootstep. A voice. A gate latch. The scrape of a rifle stock against tile.

Then fast footsteps crossed the platform. Harvey rose before he understood he had moved. Good news did not run like that. He dressed with the calm of repetition: jacket, belt, holster, knife, torch, radio, scarf. Buckles closed. Straps tightened. His heartbeat lowered itself into the rhythm of the watch.

For a moment, there was no difference between them. Outside, the cold air of the station struck his face. He descended the narrow stairs from the shelter. A gas lamp trembled beneath the vault, throwing yellow light across cracked tiles and patched metal. In that light, he saw Michael.

He was bent forward, hands on his knees, breath coming hard. His faded camouflage jacket hung open at the collar. Wet blond hair stuck to his forehead. Salt and sweat had dried in pale lines along his neck. He looked up with an expression that tried to become a smile and failed.

Harvey stopped a few feet away.

"Michael. Why are you running across the platform at this hour?"

"Where do you think I was going?" The answer died as soon as it left him.

"What happened?"

Michael straightened, swallowed, and glanced once towards the west tunnel.

"Chris and I were on east patrol, near Stewart's office. We heard him inside. Not shouting at first. Talking low. Then the door opened and he came out like he'd seen the wall move."

"Adam?"

"Yeah. Pointed straight at me. Told me to get you. If you were asleep, wake you."

"That's all?"

"That's all he said."

Michael wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I've never seen him like that."

Harvey said nothing. Adrian. Mason. Gone for hours. No return.

It had been a simple contact run. Adrian had even joked before leaving, tapping his chest plate twice with two fingers like he always did. See you when I'm back. Harvey had heard him say it dozens of times. That was exactly what frightened him now.

Their routine left no room for simple mistakes. Men did not vanish between North Greenwich and Canary Wharf because they lost their bearings. Not Adrian. Not Mason. If they were gone, the tunnel had been chosen for them.

"This isn't right," Harvey said.

"No."

"Did you see anything?"

Michael shook his head. "I checked west first. Nothing. East too, just in case."

"East makes no sense."

"I know. East means surface routes, old service galleries, places nobody signs for. But I checked anyway."

"And?"

"Nothing I liked."

Harvey looked at him. Michael lowered his voice. "Speak to Stewart. He knows something."

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

For a moment neither of them moved.

"Tell me what he says," Michael added.

"You sound curious."

"I am." A faint, tired smile crossed his face. "Very."

Harvey started towards the manager's office. After a few steps, he glanced back at the suspended shelter. For no clear reason, he thought of his military rucksack, stored beneath the cot, always half ready. The thought passed through him like a draught under a door. He kept walking.

Adam Stewart, manager of North Greenwich station, was sixty-three years old and did not waste words. He never raised his voice. He rarely repeated an order. When he spoke, people stopped what they were doing, because in twenty-five years he had taught the station that hesitation cost more than obedience. Before the collapse, he had been a bank director. After the sirens, he went underground and never really came back up. Age had not softened him. It had stripped him down to what remained useful: patience, memory, judgement.

Under Stewart, North Greenwich had survived without interruption. Shifts changed by whistle, paper slip and passing torch. Surface teams left with signatures and weapons. Customs guards logged every crate, every filter, every sack of flour. Children learned station rules before they learned the old street names above them.

That was why only soldiers ran at night. When an ordinary man ran, it meant he had either lost his mind or seen something that should not exist. The walk to Stewart's office was short, but that evening each step stretched. Harvey passed improvised homes built along the old platform edges: timber frames, sheet metal, rope, cloth, names scratched into boards. Smoke moved in thin layers beneath the ceiling. Somewhere, a child coughed. Somewhere, someone turned a valve and cursed softly when it stuck.

The station was not asleep. It was holding still. Stewart's office stood in what had once been a circular newspaper kiosk. Windows wrapped around it, giving a view of the platform, the tunnel mouth, the work areas and the customs point. Stewart had chosen it for that reason. He watched without seeming to watch.

Harvey knocked twice and stepped inside. The air in the office was colder. Stewart stood over a rusted metal desk covered in damp papers. A clock on the wall read 21:47. The old red curtains around the kiosk windows had been drawn back and tied with cord. Harvey had always hated them open. In that room, he never felt alone with the man he was speaking to. He felt the whole platform at his back.

Stewart turned a page in the departure register.

"Evening, Harvey."

"Sir."

"Didn't drag you out of bed, did I?"

"You didn't."

"No. Thought as much."

Stewart looked at him properly then. His eyes were calm, but that calm had weight.

"You've heard about Adrian and Mason."

"Only that they didn't come back."

"That's enough to hear."

Harvey stepped further into the room. "Michael said you wanted me."

"I did."

"Then tell me what happened."

For a moment, Stewart said nothing. His fingers rested on the open register, near two names written in dark pencil. Adrian Pike. Mason Bell. Beside them: west contact run, Canary Wharf, sealed diplomatic pouch, return expected before dusk.

No return mark. Harvey read the line once and felt his jaw tighten.

"I don't like your office," he said.

Stewart's mouth moved almost into a smile. "You never have."

"Too much glass."

"That's the point."

"You can't speak in here without feeling watched."

"A manager should be watched," Stewart said. "Reminds him who pays for his mistakes."

Harvey glanced at the red curtains. "Then why keep those?" Stewart touched the edge of one faded fold.

"Recovered them from the surface. A theatre, I think. Or a hotel. They belonged somewhere once."

"You'd risk a lot for the station, but not the curtains."

"I'd risk a great deal for you, Harvey." Stewart's expression did not change. "But not the curtains."

Despite himself, Harvey almost smiled. There were old things between them. Trust was one. Silence was another. Stewart had found him at London Bridge on the day of the sirens, a boy with no father, no brother, no voice left. Harvey remembered a hand closing around his wrist through the smoke.

Stay calm, lad. Don't be afraid. My name's Adam Stewart. From that moment, Stewart had become something more than authority. Not family, not exactly. A fixed point. A man who stayed where he said he would stay.

For Stewart, Harvey had been something else as well: the shadow of the son he had lost when the surface burned. He had never said it. He did not need to. Stewart closed the register.

"Let's get straight to it."

"Please."

"Something is broken in our Tube."

The words landed harder than Harvey expected. Stewart leaned on the desk. "Two couriers gone. No signal. No witness. No body. That would be enough to worry me. But it isn't what worries me most."

"What does?"

"The silence around it." Harvey waited.

"Adrian was supposed to stop here before returning to the barracks," Stewart said. "He never came. Mason never checked in at the west gate. Canary Wharf claims they received nothing from us. Nothing passed through. Nobody saw them."

"And what were they carrying?"

Stewart's eyes lifted.

"Our vote."

Harvey felt the room narrow.

“For Green Park?”

“For the council. Delivered first to Canary Wharf, then carried on under seal. That was the arrangement.”

“Why not send one of ours all the way?”

“Because trust is what alliances are made from.”

“And now?”

“Now trust may have cost us the vote.”

The platform beyond the glass seemed very still. Stewart lowered his voice. “Last month I was called to Green Park. Managers, advisers, the Council President, all of them trying to keep the system from splitting open. Trade routes. Tunnel taxes. Surface rights. Medical stores. Power shares. Everyone speaking politely while counting rifles in their heads.”

“You voted for the alliance.”

“North Greenwich did.”

“And someone wanted that vote gone.”

“Maybe.”

“You think Salim.”

Stewart did not answer quickly.

“Notting Hill Gate is independent on paper. In practice, it has become the public face of something larger. Western routes. Northern contacts. Men with weapons who call themselves escorts. Stores that appear without records. Orders that seem to come from nowhere and always lead back to King’s Cross St Pancras.”

“Salim al-Kadir.”

“Yes.”

“Igor still trusts him?”

“Igor trusts balance. He believes if every station is given enough reason to profit, no one will start a war.”

“And you?”

“I believe men like Salim do not want balance. They want obedience.”

Harvey looked at the register again.

“If he has the vote, Green Park loses support for the alliance.”

“Or believes we withdrew it. Or believes Canary Wharf intercepted it. Or believes whatever lie arrives first.”

“And the stations start blaming each other.”

“Exactly.”

For a few seconds the only sound was the clock.

“There’s more,” Stewart said.

Harvey did not like the way he said it.

“The taxes in the west have gone past enforcement. Half of anything brought down from the surface, sometimes more. Flour, batteries, medicine, filters. Confiscated at the gate. Impounded for review. People go up desperate and come back with less than they risked their lives for.”

“So they dig.”

“They dig.”

“Old galleries.”

“Smuggling passages. Service cuts. Breaches made by men who know just enough to be dangerous.”

Harvey understood before Stewart finished.

“The deforms.”

Stewart’s face hardened.

"If they open the wrong wall, it won't only be sacks of flour coming through."

Harvey turned towards the glass. Gas lamps flickered along the platform. Beyond the west gate, the tunnel was black. He had seen openings that appeared on no official map. He had seen brickwork broken from the wrong side. He had heard movement in sealed galleries after the men who sealed them were already dead.

"If the deforms come down through a breach," he said, "there won't be time for sirens."

"No."

"No order."

"No."

Harvey was no longer thinking only of Adrian and Mason. He was thinking of North Greenwich: the sleeping platforms, the children behind patched curtains, the pig pens in the side chambers, the mushroom beds grown in waste and wet soil, the butchery smoke, the water filters, the solar lines running from the broken surface to the old transformer below. Not a station. A balance.

"You can count on me," Harvey said.

"I know."

"If there's something I can stop, I'll stop it."

Stewart held his gaze. "That's why I called you. Maybe I should have sent you first."

"You didn't because of the accident."

"Yes."

Harvey touched the edge of his ribs without thinking. The old wound still tightened in cold air.

"I'm fine."

"No," Stewart said. "You're useful. That isn't the same thing."

The honesty of it stung more than sympathy would have. Stewart opened a drawer and took out a folded letter sealed in dark wax.

"This is no longer a public errand. It is not diplomatic. It is not safe. What I'm about to give you is yours alone until it reaches Green Park."

Harvey took the letter.

"What is it?"

"A second vote. A warning. Names. Routes. Everything I should have sent the first time."

"And if someone finds out?"

"They'll rob you."

Stewart paused.

"Or kill you."

Harvey slid the letter into an inner pocket and pressed it flat beneath two layers of cloth.

"When do I leave?"

"Now."

"My rucksack?"

"Ready."

Stewart pulled it from beneath the desk. It was military issue, dark waxed canvas, reinforced by hand, the edges worn pale. One side still carried old stains of soot and dried blood. It was not new. It was not decorative. It had gone into darkness before and returned.

"Spare batteries," Stewart said. "Torch. Two days' rations. Four filters. Two full rifle magazines. Three hundred pounds. Calibrated radiation metre."

Harvey looked at the money.

"Do I need that much?"

"It's a long road. Money settles arguments."

Harvey shouldered the rucksack and felt its weight settle into him. At the door, Stewart spoke again.

“Harvey.”

He stopped.

“The Tube isn’t what it was.”

Harvey looked back. Stewart’s face had become very still.

“Neither are the men in it.”

For a moment, Harvey saw London Bridge again: smoke, sirens, his father’s voice breaking apart in the crowd, Alex’s hand gone from his own. Then he nodded.

“Let them try, sir.”

He stepped outside.

Somewhere inside a buried tunnel between Canary Wharf and oblivion, Adrian opened his eyes. The silence was wrong. It was not the ordinary silence of the Tube, full of drips, distant rats, old pipes and the low breathing of tunnels. This was dense and sealed, as if the world had been packed in wet cloth. He could barely see.

Two figures stood above him. A rail vehicle moved slowly forward beneath them, its headlamp cutting a narrow path through the dark. Brickwork flashed past in weak strips of light. The wheels made almost no sound. Adrian felt motion through the floor rather than heard it, a soft glide that made the whole thing feel less like transport than burial.

He tried to move. Pain answered from his wrists, shoulders, neck. His hands and legs were tied with coarse rope. A strap pinned his torso to the metal floor. His mouth tasted of blood. His head pulsed as if something inside it had been struck more than once.

He was cargo. Memory came back in fragments: the manager’s office, the sealed document, Mason walking ahead of him, a noise in the tunnel, light where there should have been none. Then nothing. One of the men noticed him move. He was tall and narrow, bent slightly at the shoulders, with a headlamp fixed to his forehead. His overalls had once been blue, but oil, soot and tunnel dust had hardened the fabric into a dark crust. Dirty black hair hung over his eyes. When he smiled, it looked like an injury.

“Well,” he said, “look at that. He’s awake.”

The other man stood by the controls. He wore a green jacket with reflective stripes almost hidden beneath grime, cleaner overalls, and a worn cap pulled low. An old scar crossed one cheek nearly to the bridge of his nose. A cigarette rested between two fingers while his other hand worked a rusted lever. He did not look at Adrian.

“Time’s come,” the driver said. “He’s slept long enough.”

The tunnel smelled of metal, wet clothes, burned plastic and something sweet that Adrian could not name. Broken planks and crushed boxes lay beside the rails. Melted sheeting clung to the wall in strips. Whatever had happened here had happened fast, and no one had come back to tidy the dead things away. Adrian clenched his teeth.

“Who the hell are you?” Neither man answered.

His voice struck the bricks and came back thinner.

“Where’s Mason?”

The man with the headlamp smiled again.

“Don’t struggle.”

“Where is he?”

“You’ll know what you need to know soon enough.”

Adrian pulled against the ropes. Pain burned through his wrists.

“Where’s the document?”

The driver gave a short laugh without turning.

“Listen to him.”

“If Stewart finds out, you’re dead men.”

This time the man with the lamp leaned closer.

“Myles,” the driver said, “we’re nearly there. Couple more minutes.”

Myles reached into his pocket and took out a black balaclava. Adrian twisted his head away.

“Don’t.”

Myles caught his jaw with one hand.

“Easy.”

“Take your hands off me, you bastard.”

The fabric came down over Adrian’s face. Light vanished. The cloth smelled of dust, sweat and old smoke. Each breath returned hot against his mouth. The tunnel disappeared, then direction, then time. Only the vehicle remained beneath him, vibrating through his spine, through his ribs, through every nerve that still belonged to him.

He could hear the two men breathing. He could smell petrol, oxidised metal, damp wool, and cigarette ash. He had no plans. No weapon. No room to move.

Only the old instinct remained, buried deep and stubborn. Not like this. Not here. Not in silence.