

# THE HELL OF CAEN

*The true story of Marco Janzen*

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*English translation*

## CHAPTER 1 - THE BOY FROM HEEMSTEDE

Marco Janzen was born in Heemstede in 1961. He would grow into a lean but powerful man, one metre ninety-five tall, with dark curls and striking blue eyes. His gaze was almost always fixed ahead, as though he had sensed from an early age that his life would reach beyond the streets where he grew up. Behind that dreamy air lay something else, something solid that only revealed itself when it was needed: strength.

His childhood took a decisive turn when he was eleven and his parents separated. The house, once full of familiar, everyday sounds, gradually fell quiet. His mother was left with Marco and his sister, three and a half years his junior. Without complaint, she gave everything she had, working long days, sometimes at the expense of her own strength and health, with one aim always in mind: keeping her children on their feet.

It was during this time that Arie came into their lives. A doorman and pub owner, well known in Amsterdam and Haarlem, he was not a man you could easily overlook. He was big and rough-looking, but had a warm heart and a firm moral compass. From the outset he took Marco seriously, treating him not as a mere boy, but as someone who deserved to be seen.

Marco lived in Heemstede until he was eighteen, helping at home and taking odd jobs in the neighbourhood. Circumstances forced him to grow up early. Quiet and observant, he never pushed himself forward, yet there was an energy in him that revealed itself to anyone who took the trouble to look properly.

When Marco was seventeen, Arie made a practical decision whose influence would reach further than either of them could have imagined. Marco needed a driving licence, and the process in the Netherlands was slow and cumbersome. Through a friend of a friend, Arie knew someone in Florida. Without much fuss, he decided to send Marco there, not to discover the world, but to obtain, quickly and efficiently, that one document that would give him freedom.

In America, Marco got his licence within a week, an almost unbelievable achievement. He stayed on for several months, and the sunshine, cars and sense of boundless space blended into a way of life that had never been intended as an adventure, but felt like one all the same. Without realising it, he had tasted something bigger, and it stayed with him.

After returning to the Netherlands, Marco moved to Haarlem, determined to take his life in a new direction. During the day he worked in a hairdresser's, washing towels, making coffee and laughing with customers. In the

evenings he worked in Arie's pub, rinsing glasses, serving behind the bar, listening to conversations and learning from other people's mistakes, stories and silences.

In that pub, in the rhythm of working days and nights, Marco grew up. Without his noticing, his character took shape.

He continued working for Arie until he was twenty-three: loyal, reliable and still a dreamer deep down. By then, though, he was a dreamer who felt he was meant for more than the life he had been living.

Meanwhile, his mother developed rheumatism. Arie bought her a flat in Marbella, believing the warmer climate would help, and she moved to Spain. Marco saw less and less of her. Slowly but persistently, the country he had never visited began to occupy his thoughts.

Everything changed one rainy afternoon in Haarlem. Marco was rinsing glasses in the pub. Outside, heavy drops struck the window; inside, the low murmur of voices mingled with clinking glass and the radio. Then his phone rang, and an unfamiliar number lit up the screen.

"Is this Marco Janzen?"

He put down the glass and said it was.

"I'm Des," said the man at the other end. His English accent was calm and assured, the voice of someone who knew what he was saying and why he was calling. "I'm calling you from Marbella."

Marco went still for a moment. His mother lived there now, but he had never set foot in the place.

"I've heard about you," Des continued. He spoke of loyalty and risks that not everyone dared to take, then mentioned that he had something interesting for Marco. Something most men would not have the nerve to do. Marco looked out in silence, at the rain, at Haarlem, at the life he had known until that moment: safe, manageable and predictable. He felt those words set something in motion.

"What sort of work?" he asked at last.

Des gave a quiet laugh and said they would discuss it once Marco was in Marbella. Then came the words that lodged in his mind: his heart was ready for it.

Marco said nothing more, but he already knew.

This call was no coincidence, no isolated event. It was a sign pointing him somewhere.

When Des asked whether he wanted to hear more, Marco looked at his reflection in the window. He saw a boy from Heemstede, a man in Haarlem and a son whose mother was in Spain. Above all, he saw someone who knew he had to go.

“Yes, Des,” he said.

That was where it all began, before his feet had ever touched the ground in Marbella.

## CHAPTER 2 - THE JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN

In the days after Des's call, Marco felt different. He was not restless or on edge, but clear-headed and alert, as though someone had opened a door deep inside his mind that had always been locked, a door he had never dared imagine he was allowed to touch.

He tried to keep to his daily routine and act as though nothing had changed, but Arie noticed immediately. He saw it in Marco's silences, his expression, the slight slowing of his movements.

"What's going on with you?" Arie asked, drying a glass without looking directly at him.

Marco shrugged, hesitated, then said quietly that he thought he had to leave. Not because he wanted to, but because that was how it felt.

Arie studied him for a long time, as only someone who has watched a boy become a man can look at him, someone who knows when words carry too little weight and silence carries more.

"If you go," he said at last, "go because you have to, not because you want to get away."

Marco nodded slowly. "I think it's both."

The morning he left was cold and unreal. Light rain made the air grey and heavy, as though even the weather understood that something was drawing to a close.

Arie was waiting in the kitchen with two cups of coffee. As the steam rose, he reminded Marco that his mother lived there. Spain might feel unfamiliar, but it could become a kind of home too.

At Schiphol they stood facing each other for a moment, two men who no longer needed to explain anything. Arie held out his hand, and Marco took it. All Arie said was that he should call as soon as he arrived.

When Marco stepped off the plane, he felt the warmth at once. It was more than the temperature; there was something indefinable about it, as though life here breathed at a different pace.

His mother was waiting by the exit. When she embraced him and called him her boy, Marco felt something he had not felt for a long time: peace.

That evening he sat alone on the balcony, looking out into the darkness, until the soft vibration of his phone broke the silence.

"Mañana. 20:30. Marina Banús. Des."

His mother asked whom he was meeting the following day. When Marco said it was an Englishman called Des, she nodded and asked no more.

The next evening Marco was at the harbour at precisely half past eight. The water gleamed darkly, and the boats knocked gently against one another.

Then he saw Des.

Des spoke quietly, never raising his voice. He said he needed men who were not afraid, men who could keep their mouths shut when silence mattered more than speech.

Marco asked what sort of work it was.

Des looked out to sea and said the work paid well, but always came with risks.

Marco followed his gaze across the dark water. Everything he had known until then seemed to recede into the background.

“Tell me what I have to do,” he said.

And with that, the journey had begun.

## CHAPTER 3 - THE FIRST JOB

The harbour was still as Marco stood beside Des at the end of the promenade. The yachts' soft lights lay reflected in long, slow streaks across the dark water. Without quite knowing why, Marco sensed that this apparently peaceful moment would become a fault line in his life, a point beyond which nothing could be taken for granted.

Des studied him for a long time, as though he was reading more than Marco's face, trying to gauge how far he was truly prepared to go. Only after that silence did he speak.

"Marco... listen carefully. This work isn't for everyone. It isn't respectable, it isn't legal, and it certainly isn't without risk. But if you can handle it, it pays well... very well."

Marco nodded slowly. Not because he understood everything, but because he felt that backing out was no longer an option. This was the moment when words gave way to choices.

Des turned towards the dark sea, as though seeking confirmation there of what he was about to say.

"Tomorrow you're coming with us," he said calmly, almost casually. "To Morocco."

Marco stiffened at the word. In those days, Morocco carried a weight everyone understood. The name was inseparable from risk, money and things people did not discuss aloud.

Des looked him straight in the eye. This time he was direct.

"We pick up hash there," he said. "And bring it back to Marbella. Simple. But not easy."

Marco felt a sharp, unmistakable rush of adrenaline. His mind was trying to catch up with what his instincts had already grasped.

"We've been doing this for years," Des continued, his voice calm, almost reassuring. "But sometimes we lose people. Not because of us... because of the sea, the Guardia Civil, or stupid mistakes nobody thinks about until it's too late."

He paused briefly. "That's why we start small."

Des took a small folder from his jacket pocket and slid out a photograph of an old wooden fishing boat, weathered by salt and sun, its appearance hinting at more than it revealed.

"This is the boat. She looks old, but she's fast. And she sits low in the water, just as we need her to."

“Tomorrow you'll go with two of my men,” he went on. “Luis and El Toro. Two men who know what they're doing and don't make mistakes when it matters.”

“You listen. You watch. You learn. Nothing else.”

The next morning Marco stood at the window of his mother's flat, looking out at a peaceful sea. It almost seemed to be deceiving him, pretending everything was still normal.

Without looking at him, his mother asked cautiously, “You're not getting mixed up with the wrong people, are you?”

“I'm going to try something... something new,” Marco said, aware of how vague the words sounded, even to him.

Late that afternoon he walked to a forgotten corner of the harbour. The fishing boat was waiting there, old and wooden, but promising a speed and danger he could not ignore.

Des introduced him to Luis and El Toro, men who said little but whose bearing said everything.

“We leave tonight.”

For the first time Marco felt the real tension of the unknown. It was not fear, but a wire pulled taut deep inside his chest.

“Nobody talks. Nobody asks questions. Nobody does anything stupid,” Des said. “You do what they tell you.”

Marco nodded. He was ready.

His first smuggling run was about to begin.

## CHAPTER 4 - THE CROSSING

The evening sun was sinking slowly behind the hills around Marbella as Marco made his way down to the harbour. With every step he felt the day's warmth lingering in the air, while the tension in his chest grew colder and sharper. His body seemed to be anticipating what the night would mean, as though it knew he had reached a line that could never be uncrossed.

At the end of the pier, the fishing boat sat low in the water: old wood and flaking paint, unremarkable to a passer-by. To those who knew her, she was a tool designed not to attract attention, but to vanish when the need arose.

Luis was already on deck. He gave a brief, unsmiling nod. El Toro silently looked Marco up and down, not with hostility but calculation, as though weighing strength, weight and nerves in a single glance and reaching his own conclusion.

Des stepped forward and stood close to Marco, close enough that he could command obedience without raising his voice.

"Listen carefully," he said quietly, in a tone that left no room for doubt.

"Tonight you make your first crossing. We go fast, we go hard, and we don't make mistakes. Out at sea, you always pay for a mistake twice over."

He tapped his knuckles against the rail. The dull sound merged with the stillness of the harbour.

"This boat has seen more nights than you've been alive. Treat her with respect, and she'll bring you back."

The mooring lines were cast off, and the engine came to life with a deep, low thrum. As Marbella's lights dwindled and dissolved into the darkness, Marco felt solid ground slipping away behind him, in every sense.

"Primera vez?" Luis asked without turning round.

Marco nodded.

"Tranquilo," Luis said, with a brief, crooked smile. "You'll never forget your first time, even if you want to."

Once they left the shelter of the coast, the wind rose. The sea changed from a mirror into something alive and unpredictable. Waves struck the bow at an angle, water splashed over the deck, and the boat kept bouncing, though she was held firmly on course.

"Is this normal?" Marco shouted above the engine.

"Normal," Luis replied, "but never easy."

After almost two hours, a dark coastline emerged, indistinct and menacing, an outline offering neither light nor welcome.

Morocco.

They entered a narrow, hidden inlet. There were no lights and no sounds beyond the gentle wash of water against rock. Two men were already waiting. They said nothing, merely nodded, as though words were unnecessary here.

The barrels were brought aboard: heavy, tightly packed and professionally sealed. Marco understood at once that nothing about this was improvised. It was a routine worked out in every detail.

“El nuevo,” one of the men said quietly. “Parece fuerte.”

Marco kept his face impassive and his mouth shut.

The return journey began calmly. As they drew closer to Spain, however, the wind shifted and the sea grew rougher. The boat creaked and shuddered as though her limits were being tested again and again.

Just as the coastline came into view, two shapes appeared beside the rocks on the Spanish shore. Luis abruptly eased back the throttle.

“Two Guardia Civil,” El Toro said quietly, keeping his eyes on the coast.

Marco felt his heartbeat in his throat. The engine was cut, and the boat drifted silently, barely visible against the dark water. On shore, the men paced slowly back and forth, talking and smoking, entirely unaware of the cargo only a few dozen metres away.

Minutes stretched into an eternity. Every movement seemed too loud, every breath too audible.

Only when the two men turned and disappeared further along the coast did Luis raise his hand.

Now.

The engine started again, quietly at first, then with more power. Almost soundlessly, the boat glided towards the agreed landing place.

Deep into the night, they finally reached the harbour.

Des was waiting, his face unreadable in the sparse light. For a long time he looked at Marco without speaking, as though silently deciding whether this boy was worth it.

No questions.

No compliments.

Just a brief nod.

“Welcome, Marco,” he said at last. “From today, you're one of us.”

Marco knew it for certain.

There was no turning back.

## CHAPTER 5 - THE WAY UP

Marco woke with a dull, all-encompassing ache that travelled through his body like a slow wave. Every muscle seemed to be protesting against what he had endured the night before. His hands felt raw and swollen, his back burned at the slightest movement, and lack of sleep weighed heavily on his head. Yet beneath the exhaustion lay one overwhelming realisation, drowning out everything else and even bringing him a strange sense of peace: he had survived.

His mother was already making coffee in the kitchen. As Marco sat down at the table without a word, her gaze lingered on him longer than usual, searching and almost anxious, as though she was trying to read what he would not put into words.

“There’s something wrong,” she said at last, still watching him. “You look tense, as if you’ve constantly got something on your mind.”

Marco shrugged and took a sip of coffee, avoiding her eyes. He said it was nothing, that he was just tired. But he knew, and she sensed, that he was not telling her where his thoughts really were.

Later that day he was back at the harbour. Des was waiting with Luis and El Toro, as though nothing in this world ever truly began or ended; everything merely repeated itself in different forms, with different risks.

Without ceremony, Des handed him an envelope. Marco took it and immediately felt its weight, enough to know what it contained without opening it.

Five thousand guilders.

Marco looked up and asked whether this was for a single trip. Des gave a faint smile and said this was small money. There would be more, if Marco held his ground.

Not everyone looked at him kindly. Older men, hardened by years at sea, let their eyes linger a little too long and whispered words he did not need to understand to grasp their meaning.

“El chico nuevo.”

Marco took note. He knew that jealousy here could sometimes be more dangerous than wind or water.

Four days later, Des sent word that they would be sailing again that night, from the same place, but with a larger cargo. Those few words were enough to tell him this trip would be different.

That night was harder, quieter and unmistakably more threatening from the moment they left the harbour. The sea was unsettled, the wind was rising and the waves struck at an angle. With every impact the boat creaked, as though being pushed to her limits.

The barrels were heavier than last time. The silence aboard felt strained. Nobody dared say it, but everyone knew the journey back would be harder than anything Marco had experienced so far.

Halfway home, the sea grew relentlessly rough. It was not a sudden change: the waves climbed steadily, crossing one another and bouncing the boat as though she might break free of the water at any moment.

Water swept over the deck and ropes pulled taut. Even Luis, normally unshakeable, kept his eyes fixed on the horizon. At last he said that if it got any worse, they would be in real trouble.

El Toro said nothing. His jaw was clenched as he braced himself against each fresh blow from the sea.

The boat fought on, not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against water, wind and weight. Clinging on with white knuckles, Marco thought for a moment that this might be where the sea decided not to let them return. But slowly, metre by metre, they gained ground. Deep into the night, Marbella's coastline appeared again, faint and dark, yet more beautiful to Marco than anything he had ever seen.

Des was waiting on the quay. He looked at Marco for long enough to see that the night had left something behind that would never go away.

"That wasn't an easy trip back," he said.

Marco shook his head and said only, "No."

Des nodded. He told Marco to remember that feeling, because the sea never let anyone go for free.

Marco looked once more at the dark water. He knew he had gone further than he had ever imagined, and that the way up would not become safer, only harder. At the same time, he understood that, difficult as this had been, it was only the beginning.

## CHAPTER 6 - THE THOUSAND-KILO RUN

Marco had now made four successful crossings. Over those four nights, tension, speed and calculation had slowly merged into something that was beginning to resemble routine. Yet from the very start of this fifth run, he felt the difference. This was heavier, bigger, not merely because of the weight being loaded aboard, but because of a quiet awareness that the night marked a boundary. Beyond it, nothing would be small, manageable or easily put right again.

That evening Des studied him for a long time, unhurried and without explanation. He seemed to be judging Marco not by what he had done so far, but by what he might still withstand if things threatened to go badly wrong. Only after that long, silent assessment did he calmly explain that this run was bigger than anything Marco had experienced. If it succeeded, Marco would no longer simply be helping out. He would be part of the operation.

This time, no fishing boat awaited them. There was *C'est la vie*, a fifteen-metre motor yacht, low in the water, fast and powerful. She had made a name for herself among smugglers. She was built not to hide, but to stay ahead of trouble before it arose. Marco understood immediately that the scale of this operation made it a step that could not be undone.

Luis and El Toro worked together in silence, their movements precise and practised, as though words had outlived their usefulness. Marco felt that this night went beyond the earlier trips, when everything had still seemed clear and controllable.

More men were waiting on the Moroccan coast than he had ever seen before. Only when the cargo began arriving did a thousand kilos acquire its true meaning. Barrels, bags and parcels followed one another without pause, tightly taped, heavy and bulky, until there was scarcely room to move on deck and every step had to be calculated.

"El mil kilos," Luis said almost casually, as though discussing something ordinary. Marco knew there was nothing ordinary about this night.

They began the return crossing steadily. Halfway back, the weather started to turn, gradually and without warning. The wind strengthened and the waves rose, crossing one another. Instead of slicing through the water, the yacht began slamming into it. Every impact reverberated through the vessel, and even the engine sounded as though it was labouring.

Water swept over the deck. The weight was working against them. Marco felt exhaustion and doubt beginning to mingle, while no one voiced what they were all thinking.

When Luis finally said Marbella no longer looked possible, Motril ceased to be a plan and became a necessity.

They entered Motril harbour deep into the night, silent and tense. Their movements had to remain controlled despite the adrenaline coursing through them. Almost immediately, it became clear that something was missing.

The vans were not there.

Only later did they learn that the drivers were still in Marbella, unaware that C'est la vie had diverted to Motril. It would take them at least two or three hours to arrive. That meant waiting with a thousand kilos aboard, in a harbour that never entirely slept.

They lay with the engine off and the lights kept to a minimum. Time stretched out, each minute weighing more heavily than the last.

Soon they noticed a pattern. Roughly every forty-five minutes a guard made his rounds along the quay, slowly and without haste. Always the same route, always the same footsteps, as though he was part of a mechanism that had been running unchanged for years.

Luis watched his wristwatch, counted, recalculated, then whispered that they had a small window between two patrols. Everything would have to happen within it.

They waited, watched and counted again, until the guard disappeared from view and the silence lasted just long enough for them to act.

Then the vans appeared, dark and unlit. What followed was not chaos but precision. Hands worked without hesitation, movements fitted seamlessly together, and packages vanished as though they had never existed. In his head, Marco kept counting the seconds.

Before the next round began, the deck was empty and the yacht suddenly rode lightly in the water.

They left quietly, leaving no trace, as though they had never been there.

Only when Motril's coastline disappeared again and the sea swallowed them did Marco feel his breathing slowly return to normal. He realised that this night had been more dangerous than anything he had experienced before. Later, Des stood waiting on the quay in Marbella. He gave Marco a short, businesslike nod and said this was how it should be done: not fast, but precisely.

Marco knew that night they had overcome something more dangerous than violence or chance: time, patience and nerves. And it was precisely that which would inevitably draw them further in.

Because anyone who could handle this would carry on.

## CHAPTER 7 - THE DENMARK RUN

From the moment Marco stepped aboard and saw that Des himself was coming this time, he knew this voyage was no ordinary continuation of their previous work. They were moving to a level where money and routes mattered less than trust, control and the ability to give nothing away under extreme pressure, not even in a glance, a breath or the slightest flicker of doubt.

Des had already explained the run: first to Morocco to collect the cargo, then straight on towards Denmark, with six hundred and fifty kilos aboard. It was tightly planned, with no room for improvisation. Knowing this placed an extra weight on Marco, perhaps heavier than the cargo itself.

Des's presence made it final. He only sailed himself when the consequences went beyond a failed run. Slowly, that knowledge settled in Marco, heavy and inescapable, as though the vessel itself already knew that turning back was no longer an option.

For Des, the trip was a calculation, not a gamble, another move on a board he had been surveying for years. Yet he also knew that the route beyond Morocco, past Portugal and France and eventually through the English Channel, allowed no mistakes. Here, being seen was more dangerous than speed. He watched more closely than ever, not only the sea but everything moving above and around the vessel.

Luis worked silently and methodically, as always, but tension lay beneath the routine. He knew how quickly a small deviation on this route could become something impossible to control. El Toro barely spoke and constantly scanned the skies, instinctively aware that real threats never announced themselves; they always appeared without warning.

After Morocco, they sailed north along Portugal and France. The sea became busier and their margins narrowed. By the time they entered the English Channel, ships were crossing close enough to make anonymity impossible. For the first time, Marco fully understood how visible they really were, and how little protection knowledge sometimes offered.

El Toro was the first to point it out. A small reconnaissance aircraft appeared high above them, flying too low and too steadily for its presence to be a coincidence, parallel to their course. As it held position, Marco felt his stomach tighten. It was not panic, but the knowledge that moments like this rarely passed without consequences.

Des looked up without speaking, his face unreadable. He seemed to be trying to decide whether this was merely background noise or the beginning

of something he had not fully anticipated. When the plane disappeared after about half an hour, Marco tried to convince himself it need not mean anything. Deep down, though, he knew silence could be more dangerous than a direct threat.

The heavy thud of rotor blades abruptly ended that thought. A French police helicopter appeared low over the vessel, so close that Marco could feel the rotor wash. Almost simultaneously, French and British customs boats approached. On the British boat he immediately saw reporters and photographers, their cameras already aimed, as though the story had been decided before anyone had said a word.

French customs officers boarded and began their inspection with a calm that was almost worse than aggression. Every movement showed they were used to finding what others believed they had hidden. Des remained visibly present, polite and composed. Marco clung to a single thought: as long as nobody found anything, perhaps it still did not exist.

The first search revealed nothing. The French officer returned to his own vessel, leaving them in a silence in which nobody dared move or speak, as though a single breath might upset the fragile balance.

Five minutes later he came back, this time without hesitation. Their vessel was secured and towed towards a French harbour, slowly and inexorably. The helicopter kept circling, the press followed, and a cold clarity took hold of Marco. Time was no longer on their side.

In the harbour the search resumed, now with sniffer dogs. Even before the first dog reacted, Marco knew it was only a matter of time. Even the best hiding place had its limits. When the dogs gave the signal and the concealed compartment was opened, the truth lay exposed: six hundred and fifty kilos of hash, collected in Morocco, professionally hidden and carefully distributed, but found in the end.

A silence fell that carried more weight than any command. Without violence or haste, the officers put handcuffs on Marco, Luis, El Toro and Des. Cameras clicked and voices multiplied. Marco understood that this arrest was not the result of a mistake at sea, but of something deeper than visibility or bad luck.

Only six months later would they understand what had really happened. Gradually it emerged that the run had failed not through chance, but because another smuggler had betrayed them. He had passed on information, setting off a chain of events none of those aboard could see at the time.

That understanding came later.

On this day, there was only the metal around their wrists, the cameras in their faces, and the certainty that nothing ever disappears entirely without a trace.

## CHAPTER 8 - 21 JUNE

21 June was a day Marco would never forget. Not because he deliberately memorised the date or marked it on a calendar, but because his body kept recognising it, even years later. Muscles would tighten without warning; a shoulder would suddenly burn. An inexplicable tension would take hold before his mind understood where it came from, or why this particular day had buried itself so deeply within him.

Marco, Luis, El Toro and Des were separated without explanation, each sent in a different direction, as though creating distance mattered more than asking questions. Marco caught one last brief look from Des: calm and closed, almost detached. It offered no comfort, but betrayed no fear either. In a strange way it both reassured and unsettled him.

Marco had no doubt that they had put him in the worst position, as though they had deliberately chosen to break him before anyone asked a single question.

His right arm was pulled up and fastened to a metal stair rail, higher than his shoulder could bear. Almost immediately, tension shot through his muscles. His shoulder began to burn and his arm slowly tingled and went numb. His back pressed against the cold steel, and the slightest movement drove the pain deeper into his body.

Time lost its meaning, stretching into something with neither beginning nor end.

Above him, on deck, the French customs team began to celebrate, as though the night was about property and profit rather than people. Marco heard laughter, bottles being opened, someone shouting that they could sell the boat: "ON PEUT VENDRE LE BATEAU!" The words cut through the steel as though aimed at him personally.

There was music and beer. They were drinking it from his own fridge, from his own bottles. The laughter grew freer. Marco felt the handcuff tightening around his wrist, the metal slowly biting into his skin as his hand began to swell.

His fingers grew cold and his wrist throbbed. Instinctively, he began turning his hand, almost imperceptibly at first, then further, millimetre by millimetre, until the steel tore his skin and he felt warm, sticky blood running down his hand.

"ÇA SAIGNE!" he shouted hoarsely, his voice breaking. "MES MENOTTES!"

An irritated customs officer came down, swore, glanced at him and loosened the cuff. It was not concern, merely convenience, just enough to deal with the nuisance. He turned and disappeared again. The party above continued without interruption.

Marco remained silent. He waited and listened. As the sharp pain gradually became a dull, overwhelming tension, he noticed his thoughts growing clearer, sharper even, as though his body had decided there was no longer any room for fear.

Once he was certain nobody was looking, he turned his wrist again, with more control and patience this time. He felt there was just enough room for his hand. One more movement was all it took.

His hand slipped free.

His pulse raced and his breath caught, but he forced himself to move slowly. His shoulder was burning, his arm heavy and unreliable, as he made his way towards the passage leading outside.

When he emerged and fresh air filled his lungs, he felt his damp skin begin to shiver, sweat mingling with seawater. Just as he was about to take a step, he heard footsteps.

Two customs officers were coming down the stairs.

They saw him.

“ARRÊTE!”

Everything happened at once. Marco turned, ran and, without thinking, dived into the water. He felt the impact, the cold, the weight pulling him down as his clothes soaked through and threatened to drag him under.

When he surfaced, gasping, drenched and trembling with cold and adrenaline, he saw pistols pointed at him. The faces behind them were set; the voices were hard and sharp.

In that moment he knew the attempt was over.

He stayed still, raised his hands above the water and shouted that he surrendered. His voice was hoarse and breaking. His body continued to shake, not just from the cold, but from the release of tension.

They hauled him out, wet and shivering, his clothes heavy and clinging to his skin. Back aboard, they handed him dry clothes without a word, a practical necessity rather than a kindness. Then they handcuffed him again: lower this time, tighter, with no room to move.

Later Marco asked why they were not being taken straight to a cell, why everything remained suspended in that harbour, as though time was being stretched out again.