

CHAPTER ONE

Frankfurt, Germany, May 1942

The sky was the colour of slate as Marc Kilgour crossed a damp gangplank on to the *Oper*. The old steamer had spent three decades taking passengers along the River Main before fire crippled her. After years sulking at dockside, layered with rust and soot, war had brought her second life as a prison hulk.

Oper was bedded in a remote wharf east of Frankfurt's centre and only floated off her muddy berth on the highest tides. All windows above deck had been boarded and the passenger seating ripped out and replaced with stacks of narrow bunks.

Marc had lived aboard for eight months; enough time that the fourteen-year-old barely noticed the stench of bodies and cigarettes, as he walked down a gangway

between bunks that was barely wider than his shoulders. Almost all the other men were out at work, leaving behind sweat-soaked straw mattresses and graffiti etched into pine bed slats.

A man groaned for attention as Marc passed. To get off work you had to be seriously ill and while Marc didn't know him, he'd heard how the big Pole had crushed his hand while coupling freight wagons, then picked up a nasty infection that was working up his arm.

The words came in a half-delirious strain of Polish. The man wanted water, or maybe a cigarette, but he was crazed with pain and Marc upped his pace, wary of getting involved.

The timber stairs that led below *Oper's* main deck still bore the scars of fire. Charcoal black rungs creaked underfoot as Marc's hands slid down a shrivelled stair rail. The stench below deck was denser because the air got less chance to move.

All three light bulbs in the passageway had burned out. Marc felt his way, counting eight steps, passing a foul-smelling toilet, then stepping through a narrow door. A mouse scuttled as he entered the wedge-shaped room. Mice were no bother, but the rabbit-sized water rats Marc occasionally encountered freaked him out.

Marc had no watch, but guessed he had an hour before his five roommates returned from twelve-hour shifts in the dockyard. He groped in the dark,

finding the Y-shaped twig they used to prop open their oblong porthole.

Fresh air was a privilege – not many cabins below deck had them. The light revealed two racks of three bunks against opposing walls, with a metre of floor space between them. Uprturned crates made chairs and a wooden tea chest served as a table.

One of Marc's predecessors had fixed up a shelf, but everyone kept their mess tins and any other possessions tucked under straw mattresses: theft was rampant and it was riskier feeling around a bunk than stealing from an open shelf.

Marc dug into his trouser pockets, pulled out two small, rough-skinned apples and let them rest on the table. He'd swiped them from the Reich Labour Administration (RLA) office earlier. He was easily hungry enough to eat them, but the six cabin mates always shared food.

They were a decent bunch who looked out for each other. Sometimes Marc would score fruit, bread, or even cake left over after a meeting in the admin offices. His cabin mates who worked in the dockyard or train depot occasionally got their mitts into cargos of food.

The mouse resurfaced, scuttling along a bed frame and out the door as Marc climbed on to his bunk. It was on the third tier of four. With half a metre to the next bunk, it was impossible to sit up.

After sweeping some dead bugs off his blanket, Marc unlaced his wrecked boots. His feet had grown and his only pair of socks was stained dark red where his heels and toes rubbed raw. But the itching under Marc's shirt bothered him more than his bloody feet.

The straw mattress rustled as he unbuttoned his shirt. Marc was naturally stocky, but prisoner rations had been poor – particularly during the cold months between December and February – and he'd lost all the fat over his rib cage. He scratched at a couple of new flea bites as he aligned his hairy armpit with the light coming through the porthole.

Marc combed his fingertips through the mass of sweaty hairs. Sometimes you had to hunt the louse making you itch, but today a whole family had hatched in one go. He squinted as he picked half-a-dozen sesame-seed-sized body lice out of his armpit, squishing each one against the wall for a satisfying crunchy sound.

The next phase of battle was a hunt for nits – trying to pick out sticky eggs before they hatched. With so many bodies packed on the boat, with most prisoners only having one set of clothes and no proper washing facilities, body lice, fleas and bed bugs were inescapable.

Picking out bugs always depressed Marc. It was hard being far from everyone he knew, being hungry and being forced to work, but the bugs and filth were worst

because they meant he didn't even control the most intimate parts of his own body.

When Marc had done his best with the lice, he turned on to his back and stared at the mildewing wooden slats of the top bunk, less than an elbow's length from the tip of his nose. He was fiercely hungry and his mind drifted, but his hand slipped under his straw mattress and he smiled warily as he felt a piece of green card in his grubby hand.

Just touching it scared him. He'd been trying to escape since arriving in Frankfurt ten months earlier, and removing it from the administration office was a risk. If everything worked out, a card like this would be his ticket out of Germany. But if he got caught, it could just as easily become his death warrant.

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Marc was no ordinary prisoner. Reich Labour Administration records said he was Marc Hortefeux, a fifteen-year-old French citizen from Lorient, sentenced for smuggling black-market food, who'd volunteered for agricultural labour in Germany.

In reality he was Marc Kilgour, a fourteen-year-old from Beauvais near Paris. Orphaned shortly after birth, Marc had escaped to Britain after the German invasion of France two years earlier. He'd then been among the first batch of young agents trained to work undercover for an espionage group known as CHERUB.

Imprisoned by the Gestapo during a sabotage mission, Marc had been forced to kill a fellow inmate who'd bullied him. He'd faced a death sentence for murder, but a French prison commandant took pity and agreed to commute Marc's sentence, provided he volunteered for five years' labour service in Germany.

To qualify for this programme Marc needed to be fifteen years old. The commandant ensured that Marc's prison records were lost, and a replacement set drawn up with a false age and giving him a longer sentence. The next afternoon Marc had boarded a train to Frankfurt and he'd been here ever since.

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'Sleep, eh?' sixteen-year-old Laurent shouted, as he slapped Marc gently across the chest. 'Lazy bastard.'

Marc's eyes opened as he shot up, almost thumping his head on the bunk above. More than two hundred inmates had finished a shift, and as well as the sound and smell of his roommates, the Oper's cabins and passageways had come alive with shouts and clomping boots.

'Just resting my eyes,' Marc said, as his mouth stretched into a yawn. 'Reading documents is a strain.'

Laurent shook his head wryly as he unbuttoned a shirt coated in grey dust. 'Poor little eyeballs,' he laughed. 'All we had to do today was haul bags of cement.'

Laurent had been on German rations long enough to get skinny, but he still had the solid jaw and vast fists of

someone you wouldn't pick a fight with.

'Pen-pusher,' Marcel added, as he squatted on to the bunk below Marc's, peeling back his shirt to inspect skin scoured by the heavy sacks.

Marcel's words were harsh, but the tone was warm. Marc's cabin mates were envious that his ability to speak German had earned him an admin job, but none of them seemed to resent his good fortune.

Marc rolled on to his side, trying not to inhale a grey haze as four sweating lads stripped off clothes thick with cement dust.

'There's a couple of apples on the table,' Marc said.

'We'll get fat on them tiny buggers,' Marcel replied.

Marcel was a joker. Only fourteen, his crime was to lead cheers in a Rouen cinema when a newsreel showed the aftermath of a British air-raid in Cologne. The Gestapo officer two rows back didn't see the funny side and Marcel found himself riding to Frankfurt, minus two front teeth.

'Grub's up,' Richard – the last of Marc's cabin mates to arrive – shouted, as he stepped in holding a battered roasting tin. It held two loaves of black bread¹ and a tall metal jug, with steam rising off a thin, orangish soup.

Richard was a Belgian, fifteen but with tiny, sad

¹ Black bread – a coarse, near-black loaf, traditionally eaten by European peasants who couldn't afford refined white flour.

eyes and a genteel shuffle that made him seem old. As he placed the roasting tin on the table, his roommates dived under their mattresses to grab spoons and mess tins.

‘If I divide this, you’d better not moan,’ Richard said.

‘I’ll divide if you don’t want to,’ Marcel said eagerly, lunging towards the loaves.

The food on the tray was dinner and breakfast for six hungry teenagers, and the lads would fight over every crumb. Marc was lucky to have roommates who’d played fair, even during the harshest winter rationing. There were plenty of other cabins where bullies ripped off weaker inmates’ food.

‘Marcel, you mess around with that bread and I’ll slam your head in the porthole,’ Laurent said, firmly. ‘Richard’s always fair, leave it to him.’

‘Yeah, Marcel,’ a lad called Vincent added. ‘Especially seeing as you’ve spent half the day picking bugs out of your crotch.’

There was some laughter, but it was also an uncomfortable reminder of the squalor they all lived in.

Prisoners weren’t allowed knives, so Richard broke the bread into six fairly even clumps with his filthy hands, then began ladling the soup into six differently shaped mess tins. Hungry eyes tracked every move of the ladle.

‘Give me more!’ Vincent said. ‘Marc’s is way deeper.’

‘His tin’s round, yours is square,’ Richard said. ‘You both got four spoonfuls.’

Vincent folded his arms and pouted. ‘I always get screwed.’

Laurent took a mildly intimidating step towards Vincent. ‘He’s spooning it all out the same.’

Out of his cabin mates, Vincent was the only one Marc didn’t care for. He wasn’t a bad guy, but he was always having digs about stuff, and that grinds you down when there’s six of you living on top of each other.

‘Have my tin if you think there’s more,’ Marc said irritably.

Before Vincent could answer, the tension was broken by a body thumping down hard on the main deck above their heads.

‘Fight,’ Marcel said, staring up at the ceiling as cheers and shouts echoed down from the cramped main deck.

As the ruckus continued, the six lads grabbed their mess tins, and settled on the wooden crates, or propped awkwardly on the edge of the lowest bunks. Marc eyed his soup and poked his spoon in, spotting a few identifiable chunks of vegetable and strings of horse meat, amidst thin gruel made from swede and potato.

The hungry boys dispensed with their soup in under a minute, then licked out the tins. Their black bread was

days old and made slower eating. Marc stuffed a crusty end into his cheek and began softening it with his back teeth as he lay on his bunk.

‘I’ll cut each apple into six pieces,’ Richard said, as he pulled his identity disc over his head.

The metal ovals were stamped with each prisoner’s number and worn around the neck. Rubbing your disc against stone gave a sharp edge, which was no substitute for a proper knife but better than nothing at all.

‘Five pieces,’ Marc said. ‘I had mine earlier.’

‘And the rest,’ Vincent sneered. ‘I bet you scoff all kinds of shit over in that office.’

‘It’s easier cutting something into six,’ Richard complained.

‘Next time I’ll eat it myself and save the moaning,’ Marc said, as Richard cut into the first apple.

The apples were bitter and the lads screwed up their faces, but nobody complained because they appreciated the risk Marc had taken, smuggling food out of the administration office when he could have scoffed the lot.

As the six boys settled on their bunks, mouths stuffed with bread, a shout came down the passageway from the top of the stairs.

‘Raus!’

It was the first word of German every prisoner learned. It meant *out*, but the guards used it as a kind of

rebuke: *get out of bed, move out, get ready*. If the guards were in a mood and you stood close enough, *raus* would be accompanied by a flying boot or ball of spit.

The six lads in Marc's cabin all launched curses as a pair of German guards clomped down the stairs. Prisoners got called off the boat for all kinds of reasons: roll calls, searches for contraband, delousing.

'Boots on,' a guard shouted in bad French as he leaned through the doorway. It was Sivertsen, a squat, fair-haired Dane, who'd volunteered for the German army. The Russian shrapnel lodged in Sivertsen's back left him with a severe tremor in his arm. The inmates regarded him as a bit of a joke.

'What's going on?' Laurent asked, as he swung his legs out over the edge of the top bunk.

'Obey,' Sivertsen shouted. 'No questions.'

Laurent got his answer from another guard, who spoke better French and was explaining to the lads in the next cabin that a train had derailed and needed to be unloaded before it could be safely lifted back on the tracks.

As Sivertsen turned to leave, he noticed that Marc hadn't shifted from his bunk.

'Did you not hear?' Sivertsen roared, as he shoved past Richard and closed on Marc's bunk.

Marc spoke in German. 'I work for the administration office, not in the goods yard.'

Prisoners pulled all kinds of tricks to get out of work. Sivertsen didn't believe Marc and placed a hand on the baton hanging from his belt. 'This is an emergency. If I tell you to get up and work, you get up and work.'

'You need to speak to Commandant Vogel if you want to use me,' Marc said, then with a cheeky smile: 'But he'll have gone home for the day.'

At the same moment, Marcel crept up behind Sivertsen and made a loud quacking sound in his ear.

The Dane pirouetted with his stick. The blow glanced off Marcel's elbow as he dived on to his bunk and pulled up his mattress as a shield. Marc and the other lads started laughing.

'What's this?' a senior guard named Fischer roared through the doorway. 'Why is this taking so long?'

Sivertsen was a joke, but Fischer scared everyone. He was a Great War veteran on the wrong side of sixty, but a lifetime hauling cargo in the docks had kept him tough and he had a reputation for stomping inmates who talked back.

'We're all getting ready, sir,' Laurent said.

Fischer gave fellow guard Sivertsen a contemptuous look. 'Are you in control here, officer?'

'Yes, sir,' Sivertsen said, anxious not to look weak in front of his boss. 'Lad here says he works for the commandant.'

Marc was about to explain, but Fischer yanked him

towards the edge of his bunk and clamped a hand around his throat.

‘If your feet aren’t in your boots in three seconds, I’ll have you shitting blood for a month. All clear, inmate?’

‘Yes, boss,’ Marc croaked.