

THE TRAITOR'S
EMBLEM

Juan Gómez-Jurado is an award-winning journalist and bestselling author. His debut novel, *God's Spy*, was an instant bestseller, with rights sold in 42 countries. *The Traitor's Emblem* won Spain's second biggest literary award, the Premio de Novela Ciudad de Torrvieja. He lives in Spain with his wife and two children.

Also by Juan Gómez-Jurado

God's Spy
Contract with God

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Translated by Daniel Hahn



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Treason and murder ever kept together,
As two yoke-devils sworn to either's purpose,
Working so grossly in a natural cause,
That admiration did not whoop at them:
But thou, 'gainst all proportion, didst bring in
Wonder to wait on treason and on murder:
And whatsoever cunning fiend it was
That wrought upon thee so preposterously
Hath got the voice in hell for excellence . . .

William Shakespeare, *Henry V* – Act II, scene ii

Prologue

The Straits of Gibraltar
12 March 1940

When the wave threw him against the gunwale, it was pure instinct that made Captain González grab at the wood, scraping the skin all the way down his hand. Decades later – by which time he'd become the most distinguished bookseller in Vigo – he would shudder as he remembered that night, the most terrifying and extraordinary of his life. As he sat in his armchair as an old, grey-haired man, his mouth would recall the taste of blood, saltpetre and fear. His ears would remember the thundering of what they called the 'toppler of fools', the treacherous swell that takes less than twenty minutes to rise and that seamen on the Straits – and their widows – had learned to fear; and his astonished eyes would glimpse again something that, quite simply, could not have been there.

When he saw it, Captain González quite forgot that the engine was already struggling, that his crew was no more than seven men when there should have been at least eleven, that among them he was the only one who, just six months earlier, hadn't got seasick in the shower. He quite forgot that he had contemplated knocking them to the deck for not having awoken him when all the pitching and rolling began.

He held fast to a porthole in order to turn his body round and haul himself on to the bridge, bursting in to it with a blast of rain and wind that drenched the navigator.

'Get away from my wheel, Roca,' he shouted, giving the navigator a hard push. 'You're no earthly use to anyone.'

'Captain, I ... You said we weren't to disturb you unless we were about to go down, sir.' His voice trembled.

Which is precisely what's about to happen, thought the captain,

shaking his head. Most of his crew was made up of the tottering leftovers of a war that had devastated the country. He couldn't blame them for not having sensed the arrival of the great swell, just as nobody could blame him now for concentrating his attention on turning the boat around and bringing it to safety. The most sensible thing would have been to pay no attention to what he'd just seen, because the alternative was suicide. Something only a fool would attempt.

And I am that fool, thought González.

The navigator watched him, mouth wide open, as he steered, holding the boat firm and cutting in towards the waves. The gunboat *Esperanza* had been built at the end of the previous century, and the wood and steel of its hull creaked savagely.

'Captain!' yelled the navigator. 'What the hell are you doing? We'll capsize!'

'Eyes to port, Roca,' the captain replied. He was afraid too, though he couldn't allow the slightest trace of that fear to show.

The navigator obeyed, thinking the captain had gone completely mad.

A few seconds later, it was his own judgement that he'd begun to doubt.

No more than thirty swimming-strokes away, a little raft was rolling between two crests, its keel at a precarious angle. It seemed to be on the brink of capsizing; in fact, it was a miracle it hadn't gone over already. There was a flash of lightning, and suddenly the navigator understood why the captain was gambling eight lives on such a poor hand.

'Sir, there are people over there!'

'I know, Roca. Tell Castillo and Pascual. They should leave the pumps, come on deck with two ropes and hang on to those gunwales like a whore hangs on to her money.'

'Aye-aye, Captain.'

'No . . . wait . . .' said the captain, grabbing Roca's arm before he could leave the bridge.

The captain hesitated for a moment. He couldn't supervise the rescue and steer the boat at the same time. If the prow could just be held perpendicular to the waves they could make it. But if it didn't come down in time, one of his boys would end up at the bottom of the sea.

To hell with it.

‘Leave it, Roca, I’ll do it myself. You take the wheel and keep it steady, like this.’

‘We won’t be able to hold out long, Captain.’

‘The moment we get those poor devils out of there, head straight into the first wave you see, but a moment before we reach the highest point, pull the wheel to starboard as hard as you can. And pray!’

Castillo and Pascual appeared on deck, their jaws set and bodies tense, the look on their faces attempting to mask two bodies filled with fear. The captain positioned himself between them, ready to direct the perilous dance.

‘At my signal, cast out the gaffs. Now!’

The steel teeth dug into the edge of the raft; the cables tensed.

‘Pull!’

As they hauled the raft closer, the captain thought he could hear shouts, see arms waving.

‘Hold her tight, but don’t get too close!’ He bent over and picked up a boathook twice as tall as he was. ‘If they hit us it will destroy them!’

And quite possibly it would open a breach in our boat too, the captain thought. Beneath the slippery deck, he could feel the hull creaking more and more as they were tossed about by each new wave.

He manoeuvred the boathook and managed to catch one end of the raft. The pole was long and would help him keep the small craft at a fixed distance. He gave orders to tie the lines to the bitts and for a rope-ladder to be dropped, while he did his best to cling to the boathook, which bucked in his hands, threatening to split open his skull.

Another flash of lightning lit up the inside of the craft and Captain González could now see that there were four people on board. He could also finally understand how they had managed to remain on the floating soup dish as it leaped about between the waves.

Damned lunatics – they’ve tied themselves to the boat.

A figure wearing a dark waterproof was leaning across the other occupants, waving a knife and frantically cutting the ropes that bound them to the raft, slashed ropes trailing from his own wrists.

‘Go on! Climb up before this thing sinks!’

The figures approached the side of the boat, their outstretched arms reaching towards the ladder. The man with the knife managed to grab hold of it and urged the others to go on ahead of him. González’s crew helped them up. Finally there was no one left but the man with the

knife. He took hold of the ladder but as he leaned against the side of the boat to push himself up, the boathook suddenly slipped. The captain tried to hook it in again but then a wave that was higher than the rest raised the keel of the raft, hurling it against the side of the *Esperanza*.

There was a crunch, then a shout.

Horrified, the captain let go of the boathook. The side of the raft had struck the man's leg, and he was hanging from the ladder with one hand, his back against the hull. The raft was moving away, but it would only be a matter of seconds before the waves hurled it back towards the *Esperanza*.

'The lines!' the captain shouted to his men – 'for God's sake, cut them!'

The sailor closest to the gunwale searched in his belt for a knife and then began to cut the ropes. The other tried to lead the rescued men to the hatch that led to the hold before a wave hit them head-on and swept them out to sea.

His heart in his mouth, the captain searched under the gunwale for the axe that he knew had been rusting away there for many years.

'Out of the way, Pascual!'

Blue sparks flew from the steel, but the axe-blows could barely be heard above the growing clamour of the storm. For a moment, nothing happened.

Then there was a crash.

The deck shook as the raft, freed from its moorings, rose up and splintered against the prow of the *Esperanza*. The captain leaned over the gunwale, certain that all he'd find would be the dancing end of the ladder. But he was wrong.

The shipwrecked man was still there, his left hand flailing, trying to regain its grip on the rungs of the ladder. The captain reached down to him, but the desperate man was still more than two metres away.

There was only one thing for it.

He put one leg over the side and grabbed the ladder with his injured hand, simultaneously praying to and cursing that God who was so determined to drown them. For a moment he almost fell, but the sailor Pascual caught him just in time. He descended three rungs, just enough to be able to reach Pascual's hands in case he lost his grip. He didn't dare go any farther.

'Take my hand!'

The man tried to turn his body round to reach González, but he couldn't make it. One of the fingers with which he was clinging to the ladder slipped.

The captain forgot all about his prayers and concentrated on his curses. Albeit quietly. After all, he wasn't so unhinged as to taunt God at a moment like that. He was, however, mad enough to take one step farther down, and grab the poor fellow by the front of his waterproof.

For a second that seemed eternal, all that held those two men to the swinging rope-ladder were nine fingers, the worn sole of a boot and a mountain of willpower.

Then the shipwrecked man managed to turn himself around enough to cling on to the captain's body. He hooked his feet on to the rungs, and the two men began their ascent.

Six minutes later, bent over his own vomit in the hold, the captain could scarcely believe their luck. He was struggling to calm down. He still wasn't quite sure how the useless Roca had managed to see off the storm, but already the waves were beating less insistently against the hull, and it seemed clear that this time the *Esperanza* was going to make it.

The sailors stared at him, a semicircle of faces filled with exhaustion and strain. One of them held out a towel. González waved it away.

'Clean up this mess,' he said as he straightened up, gesturing towards the floor.

The dripping castaways huddled in the darkest corner of the hold. It was scarcely possible to make out their faces in the trembling light of the cabin's only lamp.

González took three steps towards them.

One of them came forward, and held out his hand.

'Danke schön.'

Like his companions he was covered from head to toe in a hooded black waterproof. Only one thing distinguished him from the others – a belt round his waist. And shining in the belt was the red-handled knife he had used to cut the ropes that had secured his friends to the raft.

The captain couldn't contain himself.

'Damned son of a bitch! We could all be dead!'

González swung his arm back and struck the man on the head,

knocking him down. His hood fell back, revealing a head of fair hair and a face with angular features. One cold blue eye. Where the other should have been there was only a stretch of wrinkled skin.

The shipwrecked man got up and repositioned a patch that must have been displaced by the blow over the socket. Then he put his hand on his knife. Two of the sailors stepped forward, fearing he would rip the captain apart there and then, but he merely drew it out gently and threw it on to the floor. He held his hand out again.

‘Danke schön.’

In spite of himself, the captain smiled. That damned Kraut had balls of steel. Shaking his head, González held out his hand.

‘Where the devil did you come from?’

The other man shrugged. It was clear he didn’t understand a word of Spanish. González studied him, slowly. He must have been thirty-five to forty years old, and under his black waterproof he wore dark clothes and heavy boots.

The captain took a step towards the man’s companions, eager to know who he’d gambled his boat and crew for, but the other man held out his arms and moved to the side, blocking his way. He planted his feet firmly, or at least he tried to, as he found it difficult to remain standing and the expression on his face was pleading.

‘He doesn’t want to challenge my authority in front of my men, but he’s not prepared to let me get too close to his mysterious friends. Very well, then, have it your way, damn you. They’ll deal with you back at headquarters,’ thought González.

‘Pascual.’

‘Sir?’

‘Tell the navigator to make for Cadiz.’

‘Aye-aye, Captain,’ said the sailor, disappearing through the hatch. The captain was about to follow him, heading back towards his own cabin, when the German’s voice stopped him.

‘Nein. Bitte. Nicht Cadis.’

The German’s face had altered completely when he heard the city’s name.

‘What is it you’re so terrified of, Fritz?’

‘Komm. Komm. Bitte,’ said the German, gesturing that he should approach. The captain leaned in and the other man began begging in his ear. *‘Nicht Cadis. Portugal. Bitte, Kapitän.’*

González drew back from the German, contemplating him for over a minute. He was sure he wouldn't be able to get any more out of the man, since his own grasp of German was limited to yes, no, please and thank you. Again he faced a dilemma where the easiest solution was the one that appealed to him the least. He decided that he had already done enough by saving their lives.

What are you hiding, Fritz? Who are your friends? What are four citizens of the most powerful nation in the world, with the biggest army, doing crossing the Straits on a little old raft? Were you hoping to get to Gibraltar on that thing? No, I don't think so. Gibraltar is full of the English, your enemies. And why not come to Spain? Judging by the tone of our glorious Generalísimo, we'll all be crossing the Pyrenees before long to give you a hand killing the Frogs, chucking stones at them most likely. If we really are as thick as thieves with your Führer . . . Unless you're not so keen on him yourself, of course.

Damn it.

'Watch these men,' he said, turning to the crew. 'Otero, give them some blankets and get something hot inside them.'

The captain returned to the bridge, where Roca was plotting a course for Cadiz, avoiding the storm that was now blowing into the Mediterranean.

'Captain,' said the navigator, standing to attention. 'May I just say how much I admire what . . .'

'Yes, yes, Roca. Thank you very much. Is there any coffee?'

Roca poured him a cup and the captain sat down to savour the brew. He took off his waterproof cape and the sweater he was wearing underneath, which was soaking. Fortunately it wasn't cold in the cabin.

'There's been a change of plan, Roca. One of the Bosch we rescued has given me a tip-off. Seems there's a band of smugglers at the mouth of the Guadiana. We'll go to Ayamonte instead, see if we can steer clear of them.'

'Whatever you say, Captain,' said the navigator, a little put out at having to plot a new course. González fixed his gaze on the back of the young man's neck, slightly concerned. There were certain people you couldn't talk to about certain matters, and he wondered whether Roca might be an informer. What the captain was proposing was illegal. It would be enough to get him sent to prison, or worse. But he couldn't do it without his second-in-command.

Between sips of coffee, he decided that he could trust Roca. His father had killed *nacionales* after the fall of Barcelona a couple of years earlier.

‘Ever been to Ayamonte, Roca?’

‘No, sir,’ said the young man, without turning round.

‘It’s a charming place, three miles up the Guadiana. The wine is good, and in April it smells of orange blossom. And on the other bank of the river, that’s where Portugal starts.’

He took another sip.

‘A stone’s throw, as they say.’

Roca turned, surprised. The captain gave him a tired smile.

Fifteen hours later, the deck of the *Esperanza* was deserted. Laughter rose from the mess where the sailors were enjoying an early dinner. The captain had promised that after they’d eaten they would drop anchor at the port of Ayamonte, and many of them could already feel the sawdust of the tavernas under their feet. Supposedly the captain was minding the bridge himself, while Roca guarded the four shipwrecked passengers.

‘You’re sure this is necessary, sir?’ asked the navigator, unconvinced.

‘It will just be the tiniest bruise. Don’t be so cowardly, man. It has to look real. Stay down on the floor for a bit.’

There was a dry thud and then a head appeared through the hatch, quickly followed by the castaways. Night was beginning to fall.

The captain and the German lowered the lifeboat into the water, to port, the side farthest from the mess. His companions climbed in and waited for their one-eyed leader, who had covered his head with his hood once more.

‘Two hundred metres in a straight line,’ the captain told him, gesturing towards Portugal. ‘Leave the lifeboat on the beach – I’ll need it. I’ll fetch it back later.’

The German shrugged.

‘Look, I know you don’t understand a word. Here . . .’ said González, giving him back his knife.

The man tucked it away in his belt with one hand, while he fumbled under his waterproof with his other. He took out a small object and placed it in the captain’s hand.

‘*Verrat*,’ he said, touching his index finger to his chest. ‘*Rettung*,’ he said, touching the chest of the Spaniard.

González studied the gift carefully. It was a sort of medal, very heavy. He held it closer to the lamp hanging in the cabin; the object gave off an unmistakable glow.

It was made of solid gold.

‘Look, I can’t accept . . .’

But he was talking to himself. The boat was moving away already, and none of its occupants looked back.

To the end of his days, Manuel González Pereira, former captain in the Spanish navy, dedicated every minute he could spare away from his bookshop to the study of that gold emblem. It was a double-headed eagle set on an iron cross. The eagle was holding a sword, there was a number 32 above its head and an enormous diamond encrusted in its chest.

He discovered that it was a Masonic symbol of the highest rank, but every expert he spoke to told him that it had to be a fake, especially since it was made of gold. The German Masons never used noble metals for the emblems of their Grand Masters. The size of the diamond – as far as the jeweller was able to ascertain without taking the piece apart – made it possible to date the stone approximately to the turn of the century.

Often, as he sat up late into the night, the bookseller thought back to the conversation he’d had with ‘The One-Eyed Mystery Man’, as his little son, Juan Carlos, liked to call him.

The boy never tired of hearing the story, and he invented far-fetched theories about the identity of the castaways. But what excited him most were those parting words. He had deciphered them with the help of a German dictionary, and he repeated them slowly, as though by doing so he might better understand.

‘*Verrat* – treachery. *Rettung* – salvation.’

The bookseller died without ever having solved the mystery hidden in his emblem. His son Juan Carlos inherited the piece, and became a bookseller in his turn. One September afternoon in 2002, an obscure old writer came by the bookshop to give a talk about his new work on Freemasonry. Nobody turned up, so Juan Carlos decided, in order to kill time and lessen his guest’s obvious discomfort, to show him a photo of the emblem. On seeing it, the writer’s face changed.

‘Where did you get this photo?’

‘It’s an old medal that belonged to my father.’

‘Do you still have it?’

‘Yes. Because of the triangle containing the number thirty-two we worked out that it was . . .’

‘A Masonic symbol. Obviously a fake, because of the shape of the cross, and the diamond. Have you had it valued?’

‘Yes. The materials are worth about three thousand euros. I don’t know if it has any additional historical value.’

The writer looked at the piece for several seconds before replying. His lower lip trembled.

‘No. Definitely not. Perhaps as a curiosity . . . but I doubt it. Still, I’d like to buy it. You know . . . for my research. I’ll give you four thousand euros for it.’

Juan Carlos politely refused the offer, and the writer left, offended. He started coming to the bookshop on a daily basis, even though he didn’t live in the city. He pretended to rummage among the books, though in reality he spent most of the time watching Juan Carlos over the thick plastic frames of his glasses. The bookseller began to feel harassed. One winter night, on his way home, he thought he heard footsteps behind him. Juan Carlos hid in a doorway and waited. Moments later the writer appeared, an elusive shadow shivering in a threadbare raincoat. Juan Carlos emerged from the doorway and cornered the man, holding him up against the wall.

‘This has to stop, do you understand?’

The old man started to cry and fell babbling to the ground, hugging his knees.

‘You don’t understand, I have to have it . . .’

Juan Carlos softened. He accompanied the old man to a bar and set a glass of brandy in front of him.

‘Right, now tell me the truth. It’s very valuable, isn’t it?’

The writer took his time before replying, studying the bookseller, who was thirty years his junior and six inches taller. Finally he gave up.

‘Its value is incalculable. Though that’s not the reason I want it,’ he said, with a dismissive gesture.

‘Why, then?’

‘For the glory. The glory of discovery. It would form the basis for my next book.’

‘On the piece?’

‘On its owner. I’ve managed to reconstruct his life after years of research, digging around in fragments of diaries, newspaper archives, private libraries . . . the sewers of history. As few as ten very uncommunicative men in the world know his story. All of them Grand Masters, and I’m the only one with all the pieces. Though no one would believe me if I told them.’

‘Try me.’

‘Only if you’ll promise me one thing. That you’ll let me see it. Touch it. Just once.’

Juan Carlos sighed.

‘All right. On the condition you have a good story to tell.’

The old man leaned over the table and began to whisper a story that had, till that moment, been passed from mouth to mouth between men who had sworn never to repeat it. A story of lies, of an impossible love, of a forgotten hero, of the murder of thousands of innocent people at the hands of one man. The story of the traitor’s emblem . . .

THE PROFANE
1919—21

Where understanding never goes beyond one's own self



*The symbol of the Profane is a hand held out, open, solitary but capable
of grasping hold of knowledge.*

1

There was blood on the steps of the Schroeders' mansion.

When he saw it, Paul Reiner shuddered. It wasn't the first time he'd seen blood, of course. Between early April and May 1919, Munich's inhabitants had experienced in thirty days all the horror they'd managed to avoid in four years of war. In the uncertain months between the end of the empire and the proclamation of the Weimar Republic, countless groups had attempted to impose their agendas. The communists had taken the city, and declared Bavaria a Soviet republic. Lootings and murders had become widespread as the Freikorps narrowed the gap between Berlin and Munich. The rebels, knowing their days were numbered, tried to get rid of as many political enemies as they could. Mostly civilians, executed in the dead of night.

Which meant that Paul had already seen traces of blood, but never at the entrance to the house where he lived. And although there wasn't much, it was coming from beneath the big oak door.

With any luck Jürgen has fallen on his face and knocked out all his teeth, thought Paul. *Maybe that way he'll give me a few days' peace.* He shook his head sadly. He didn't have that kind of luck.

He was only fifteen, but already a bitter shadow had been cast over his heart, like clouds blocking the sluggish mid-May sun. Half an hour earlier, Paul had been lazing around among the bushes of the Englischer Garten, glad to be back at school after the revolution, though not so much for the lessons. Paul was always ahead of his classmates, and of Professor Wirth, too, who bored him immensely. Paul read everything he could get his hands on, gulping it down like a drunk on payday. He only feigned attention during lessons, but always ended up top of the class.

Paul didn't have friends, however hard he tried with his classmates. But in spite of everything, he did enjoy school, because the hours of lessons were hours spent away from Jürgen, who attended an academy where the floors weren't made of linoleum and the edges of the desks weren't chipped.

On his way home Paul always took a turn around the Garten, the largest park in Europe, which that afternoon seemed almost deserted, even by the ubiquitous red-jacketed guards who would reprimand him whenever he strayed off the path. Paul made the most of this opportunity, and took off his shabby shoes. He liked to walk barefoot on the grass, and bent down distractedly as he went, picking up a few of the thousands of yellow pamphlets that the Freikorps planes had dropped over Munich the previous week, demanding the communists' unconditional surrender. He threw them in the bin. He would gladly have stayed to clear up the whole park, but it was Thursday, and he had to polish the floor of the fourth storey of the mansion, a task that would occupy him until dinner-time.

If only he weren't there . . . thought Paul. *Last time he locked me in the broom cupboard and poured a bucket of dirty water on to the marble. Good thing Mama heard me shouting and unlocked the cupboard before Brunhilda found out.*

Paul wanted to remember a time when his cousin hadn't behaved like that. Years ago, when they were both very small and Eduard would hold their hands and take them to the Garten, Jürgen used to smile at him. It was a fleeting memory, almost the only fond memory of his cousin that remained. Then came the Great War, with its orchestras and parades. And off marched Eduard, waving and smiling as the lorry that carried him away gathered speed and Paul ran alongside it, wanting to march with his big cousin, wishing he were sitting beside him sporting that impressive uniform.

For Paul, the war had consisted of the news he read each morning posted on the police station wall, which was on his way to school. Frequently he had to slip through a thicket of legs – something he never found difficult as he was as thin as a rake. There he read delightedly about the advances of the Kaiser's army, which daily took thousands of prisoners, occupied cities, and expanded the borders of the empire. Then in class he would draw a map of Europe and amuse himself by imagining where the next great battle would take place, and wondering

whether Eduard would be there. Suddenly, and quite without warning, the 'victories' started happening ever closer to home, and the war dispatches almost always announced 'a return to the position of security originally envisaged'. Until one day a huge poster announced that Germany had lost the war. Underneath was a list detailing the price that would have to be paid, and it was a very long list indeed.

Reading that list and the poster, Paul had felt as if he'd been deceived, cheated. Suddenly there was no cushion of fantasy to mitigate the pain of the increasing number of thrashings he received from Jürgen. The glorious war would not wait for Paul to grow up and join Eduard at the front.

And there was certainly nothing glorious about it at all.

Paul stood there for a while, looking at the blood at the entrance. In his mind he rejected the possibility that the revolution had started again. Freikorps squads were patrolling the whole of Munich. This puddle seemed fresh, however, a small anomaly on the great stone whose steps were large enough to fit two men lying end to end.

I'd better hurry. If I'm late again, Aunt Brunhilda will kill me.

He debated a little longer between fear of the unknown and fear of his aunt, and the latter prevailed. He took the little key to the service entrance from his pocket and let himself into the mansion. Inside, everything seemed quiet enough. He was approaching the staircase when he heard voices from the main living quarters of the house.

'He slipped as we were climbing the steps, madam. It's not easy to hold him up, and we're all very weak. It's been months and his wounds keep reopening.'

'Incompetent fools. No wonder we lost the war.'

Paul crept across the main entrance hall, trying to make as little noise as possible. The long bloodstain that ran under the door narrowed into a series of drips that led towards the largest room in the mansion. Inside, his aunt Brunhilda and two soldiers were leaning over a sofa. She kept rubbing her hands together until she realised what she was doing and then hid them in the folds of her dress. Even though he was hidden behind the door, Paul couldn't help quaking with fear when he saw his aunt like this. Her eyes were like two thin grey streaks, her mouth was twisted into a question mark, and her authoritative voice trembled with rage.

‘Look at the state of the upholstery. Marlis!’

‘Baroness,’ said the servant, approaching.

‘Go and fetch a blanket, quickly. Call the gardener. His clothes will have to be burned, they’re covered in lice. And someone tell the baron.’

‘And Master Jürgen, Madam Baroness?’

‘No! Especially not him, you understand? Is he back from school?’

‘He has fencing today, Madam Baroness.’

‘He’ll be here any moment. I want this catastrophe sorted out before he returns,’ Brunhilda ordered. ‘Go!’

The servant rushed past Paul, her skirts swishing, but he still didn’t move, because he had spotted Eduard’s face behind the legs of the soldiers. His heart began to beat faster. So that was who the soldiers had carried in and laid down on the sofa.

Good God, it was his blood.

‘Who is responsible for this?’

‘A mortar shell, madam.’

‘I know that much already. I’m asking why you’ve only brought my son to me now, and in this state. It has been seven months since the war ended, and not a word of news. Do you know who his father is?’

‘Yes, he’s a baron. And Ludwig here is a bricklayer, and I’m a grocer’s assistant. But shrapnel has no respect for titles, madam. And the road from Turkey was a long one. You’re lucky he’s back at all; my brother won’t be coming back.’

Brunhilda’s face turned livid.

‘Get out!’ she hissed.

‘That’s nice, madam. We return your son to you and you throw us out into the street without so much as a glass of beer.’

A glimmer of remorse might perhaps have crossed Brunhilda’s face, but it was overshadowed by rage. Speechless, she raised a trembling finger and pointed towards the door.

‘Piece of aristo shit,’ said one of the soldiers, spitting on the carpet.

Reluctantly they turned to leave, their heads down. Their sunken eyes filled with weariness and disgust, but not surprise. There was nothing, thought Paul, that could shock these men now. And when the two men in large grey greatcoats moved out of the way, Paul finally understood the scene.

Eduard, Baron von Schroeder’s firstborn son, was lying unconscious on the sofa at an odd angle. His left arm was propped up on some

cushions. Where his right should have been, there was only a badly sewn fold in his jacket. Where he should have had legs, there were two stumps covered in dirty bandages, one of which was seeping blood. The surgeon had not cut them in the same place – the left was severed above the knee, the right just below.

Asymmetric mutilation, thought Paul, remembering that morning's art history class, and his teacher discussing the Venus de Milo. He realised he was crying.

When she heard the sobbing, Brunhilda raised her head and hurled herself towards Paul. The look of contempt and disdain she usually reserved for him had been replaced by one of hatred and shame. For a moment Paul thought she was going to strike him and jumped away, falling backwards and covering his face with his arms. There was a tremendous crash.

The doors to the hall had been slammed shut.