

The ring of Uriel - El anillo de Uriel

Tito del Muro

CHAPTER 1

At this time in the early morning, around two o'clock, the financial district of Spain's capital showed a quite different look it would show a few hours later. On the madrilenian Castellana promenade, the cars drove fluently and the pavements along the buildings couldn't bear the people's constant and fast walking in rush hour. The skyscrapers were dozing like giant trees immersed in the shadows of the forest. Their closed doors gave them the appearance of uninhabited mansions. Just some light could be seen in some high floors, like a slight vital sign of that body erected on steel and cement.

At the feet of those towers, some hostess bars were waking up like fireflies. Places that, during the day go unnoticed in the mundane hubbub of the city, hidden among the copy and phone shops, bank branches and other businesses.

And when the shadows get intense, the moment when the semi-darkness hides shapes and sins in it's creases, that's when those luxurious clubs gathered up their selected clientele. There attended formal managers that cleared out their daily stress with laughter and alcohol. Businessmen that try to buy their clients' will with the carnal attentions from the girls in the bar. Revellers and bon viveurs who waste time and money on partying. Groups of friends that pretend to escape from the monotony of their grey lifes, their grey marriages, taking shelter in that Neverland to wich they always return driven by the boredom of their mediocrity. Clumsy individuals who can't get the wet warmth of a woman without paying for it. Faint-hearted guys who only find their manliness in the company of whiskey and in looking down on those who can't do other thing than bear them with resignation.

Ones, respectable for a hypocritical society, others despicable because of their meanness, but all taken in by the same pleasure, embraced by the same smoke that clouded the sight and doesn't let you see your own misery. Concealing accomplices covering up for each other.

On one of these pavements, only lit up by the light of the streetlights the thick trees couldn't catch, on one of these facades a neon twinkles like a trap for the insects that were flying around there. The fluorescent light shines on a big figure standing in front of the door, enhancing the hard features of that guy that looked like a boxer. He barely fits in the dark suit he wears and that looked like a fancy dress on him.

The taxis stop at the door, unloading the animated clients. Usually in those taxis come solitary travellers that just pass through the city and rather spend the hours in that place the taxi-driver recommended than in a sad hotel room.

The doorman rushes towards the door as fast as his size allows and politely greets the new arrival, giving him access to the club. At that moment the sounds from inside, the music and the chatting interrupted the calm on the street, just to fall silent as soon as the door closes and it's guardian places himself in front again.

But that night was a little different than usual. No customers were allowed unless they were on the limited guest list for the private party that was held in that occasion.

There was already a quite good amount of people enjoying the liquors and the girls when a car stopped under the bluish light of the sign of the club. Out of the dark Mercedes E-Class came three men whom the doorman opened the door as soon as the car stopped.

The three middle-aged men wore suit and tie of shameless quality, even though on them it looked like the rags of a scarecrow.

The guy who looked like a boxer that has been knocked out many, too many times, walked with them to the door, which he opened nodding as a gesture of respect. The three new arrivals kept talking, almost without paying attention to that bungling great fool. He didn't know what they were saying, but he knew that the language they spoke was Russian.

The luxurious vehicle that had brought them started again and parked a few metres further. When the motor stopped and the lights went out, the driver got out and, without haste, he approached the club where his bosses were being received. When he got to the guy at the door he greeted him with a handshake and reached for a pack of cigarettes and a lighter he had in his pocket. He offered a cigarette to the doorman and took one himself, tapping with his fingers on the packet. Protecting the flame from the wind with his hand, he lit up the club worker's cigarette and then his own. The yellowish light allowed to see his face. He was young, sallow. Although he was fit he seemed a weakling compared to the doorman's body. They had a chat while they were smoking. The driver was doing it with one hand in his pocket, while he leaned carelessly on the facade of the building. In that position, when the neonlight shone, a dark and bulky shadow could be seen underneath his buttoned jacket that, because of his posture, was unhitched of the lapels. Whatever the thing that cast the shadow was, it wrinkled up the jacket, a little bit under the breast pocket. The guy noticed it and recovered his composure by fastening and tightening his jacket.

The Cerberus shakes frequently his shoulders, trying to make himself comfortable in the formal clothing his position required, that looked like it was about to explode. He repeated

that gesture of obvious discomfort every once in a little while, almost like a nervous tic. It looked like he was trying to do some footwork, avoiding the hits, fighting against that suit that certainly didn't suit him at all.

From time to time, he opened the door of the club, like to assure himself everything was alright. The men's gruff guffaws mixed up with the high-pitched giggles of their female companions. Mocking phrases in Russian, someone already drunk stood up and started to dance to the music of questionable taste that stunned the hall. Others, maybe as drunk as the guy himself applauded him, while a girl joined him.

The guy, already shirtless, grabs her by her waist while he holds a large glass with his free hand. Girls rode like horsewomen on the knees of other partying guys.

Feodor Ivanovich organised the party to celebrate his birthday. Feodor was a distinguished member of the Russian Brotherhood. Although it had been a while since he wasn't a simple Mafia capo anymore, and looked like a respectable businessman, doing businesses from real-estate to import and export, he was still an outstanding member of the clan.

Feodor was sitting on one of the couches near the dancefloor. Beside him were the two men who arrived with him in the car, his two "executive secretaries". In front of them was a table with several bottles of champagne and a tray full of angel dust prepared in thin lines that disappeared fast, sniffed with a small tube by the courtesans that flattered him with their company.

The boxer took a quick glance, made a gesture of satisfaction and closed the door, shaking his body again trying to put the suit back in place on his tremendous body.

-They are having a great time. Hey!- said the young bodyguard while he took his hand to his pocket, taking out a little transparent plastic bag with a whitish powder inside. He opened it and carefully put a little bit on the back of his hand, taking it to his nose quickly. His nostrils sniffed the drug briskly, picked up the remains with the tip of his tongue and passed it over his gum. His nasal wings contracted and expanded a couple of times.

-Why should they be the only ones to have fun, right? - he said while he handed the bag to his enormous colleague who was a head taller than him.

He rejected the offer with a surly gesture.

-I don't do that shit – he blurted out with his resounding voice.

Despite his decadence he still kept some good habits from his days as athlete.

The other guy shrugged his shoulders while he put away the little bag and held his index fingers again under his nostrils.

More than an hour had passed since the hosts had arrived. The entrance to the club was

covered with butts from the cigarettes the driver consumed almost one after another.

Between the main road of the artery of Madrid and the service road was a plant-lined promenade through which passed a couple of workers in charge of watering the parterres and the lawns. One drove a little vehicle with a water tank behind the cabin, with a hose his colleague was handling.

The two guys at the club door observed them as they got closer.

-Look, poor devils like us working so late – said the younger bully.

The other oversized guy nodded. He was obviously quite tight-lipped.

The two city park workers were getting closer, absorbed in their work and the noise of the vehicle was getting louder as it approached.

-I'm out of cigarettes - the driver said-, I'm going to look in the car. I should have another pack there. I want this damn party to end, so I can finally go to sleep. Fuck!- he added, emphasising on that rude exclamation.

He crossed the street and headed to the car parked twenty metres further.

The doorman used that moment to take a look inside the room.

Right at that moment they had dimmed the light until turning it off almost completely and the music had stopped.

In the hallway that came from the bar appeared a very pretty girl dressed in a tight minidress, walking and moving her hips exaggeratedly. She was pushing a little cart. On it was a big cake, packed with little candles.

-Happy birthday!

Everyone started to sing in chorus with a drunk voice.

The girl in the dress placed the cart carefully in front of Feodor and, holding his face with her hands, she kissed him on the cheek.

-Happy birthday – she said, keeping her long fingered hands on the honoree's face.

Whistlings could be heard and somebody uncorked a bottle of champagne and filled a glass he offered Feodor. He got up from the couch, grabbing, with one hand the girl's hand, and with the other one the glass, which he raised above his head turning it in every direction in the room.

-Nasnarobia – he yelled.

-Nasnarobia – answered the guests.

Feodor sat down again and toasted with his two secretaries.

The ex-boxer observed the scene with a smile that appeared unintentionally on his hard-featured, pockmarked face.

The street sweepers arrived near the establishment and the vehicle noise and the water

stream got intense in a night lack of street noise.

The driver expanded in the driver's seat, with his legs stretched out of the vehicle.

As he closed the establishment's door, the employee heard the dull thuds of several bottles of champagne being uncorked. He hadn't closed the door completely yet when he heard four more detonations following each other, too hard and too fast to come from a bottle of champagne. He thought that almost by instinct, but he didn't attach importance to it until, almost immediately, a high-pitched shriek raised above the laughing and the party racket. More hysterical screams followed the first one. Noise from glasses bursting against the floor, from the clumsy movements of the drunk men that crashed against each other without knowing where to go, confused and scatterbrained. The establishment was still in semi-darkness.

The watering noise didn't allow to hear anything outside and the driver was still sitting relaxed in the Mercedes, his back leaned against the leather seat.

The doorman opened the door suddenly and, without thinking, he jumped inside.

He hadn't passed the doorstep yet when he saw a silhouette in front of him. He saw clearly the flash that shined brightly just a few centimetres from his face. Despite the immediacy, he could conserve a grimace of surprise and disbelief. The bullet went through his head cleanly and his body weakened right away.

Outside, the noise produced by the watering machine stopped. The operators wanted to have a break just when the shot that took the boxer down could be heard.

The driver got tense as a spring and turned his head towards the door just in time to see the doorman's legs collapse under the dead weight of his huge body. He saw how he fell on his knees at first, but then he fell down on the back, with that surprised dead mask on his face. Out of a little, dark hole in his forehead came a little stream of blood.

His executioner came out of the shadows, jumped over the lifeless body, to whom the neon lights gave the appearance of a broken action figure, and reached the pavement, turning right. He still held the gun. He saw the two street sweepers, who were completely paralyzed during the few seconds the entire scene actually happened.

He looked at them for a moment, while he put away the gun under his jacket.

He walked a few metres, with quick steps and when he was just about to get round the corner that connected the transverse street to the Castellana Avenue, he felt some kind of itch on his back. He didn't know if he felt that itch before or after hearing a detonation that resounded in the silence that dawn.

He kept walking. Another shot. When the bullets inside him cooled down the unbearable

pain made him stop, and he took both hands back trying to reach the point where he felt that stabbing pain.

He turned around, with his face contracted by the intense pain the 38 ammunition caused him.

The driver had one elbow on the car's bonnet and held his revolver with both hands to make a clear shot.

The light of the streetlights multiplied like drops of light in his foggy eyes. The right shoulder was pushed by the force of the impact of another bullet that entered him just above the lung. He leaned on a wall and slid to the ground, crawling, trying to turn round the corner. He kept creeping until he finally collapsed on the pavement.

Through the club's door came out men and women in a stampede, trampling in their escape over the unhappy ex-athlete's body, that was still lying where he fell.

Soon the police siren could be heard, whose blue lights lit up the asphalt.

The gypsy-like guy entered the dive, pushing aside those who were coming out of it.

The birthday cake's still lit candles lit up dimly the three corpses, huddled up like marionettes without strings.

The girl in the minidress sobbed nervously in an anxiety attack that paralyzed her, looking with disbelief at her arms that were dyed with the blood of the murdered. When the already ex-bodyguard approached her, she looked up and stared at him with her soaked eyes and her half-open painted lips, not being able to say a word. She just rubbed her arms again and again, cleaning them with the party-dress, trying to make it disappear, trying to make disappear from her memory what she just saw and what her brain denied to accept as real.

The dark-skinned guy looked at her for a moment and then let his eyes wander over the riddled bodies, confirming that he had definitely lost his job. He got out of the club and ran to the car that still had its door open. He started it and accelerated, making the wheels squeak. He took the main road and with a risky manoeuvre he turned the steering wheel to change the direction and reach the Burgos Highway. It was the fastest escape route. Later, he'll possibly leave the sumptuous Mercedes in any industrial estate nearby.

Bluish flashes entered the ruined club. Two agents came out of the patrol car that had stopped on the kerb. They drew their guns, twisting their waists a little to reach them and entered the establishment cautiously.

The girl that had pushed the dessert cart kept rubbing her arms frantically against the fabric of her dress. Occasionally she moved her hair aside with the back of her hand and,

with the bloodstained face and the smeared make-up she looked like a Noh-theatre mask. Her sobbings had become quieter, but she still wasn't reacting, with her look lost on the floor covered in broken glass. She didn't even look up when one of the policemen grabbed her by the elbows to lift her up and take her outside to the ambulance that had just arrived. The health personnel that came out of it covered her with a thermal blanket and put her in the vehicle of the madrilenian paramedics. Before she got in she turned around. She hadn't noticed the big bulge also covered with a thermal blanket that remained on the tiled club entrance floor. Her mind unintentionally related that golden mound that reflected the neon lights with that oversized guy who sometimes accompanied her to the taxis and said goodbye to her with a friendly "See you tomorrow, princess", to what she always responded with a tired, but sincere smile.

She remembered her colleague's impressive figure, who was now down to a bulge from which a fist as a iron mace stood out, that seemed like silk to her when he helped her to jump over the puddles on the street on rainy days.

The ambulancemen lifted her carefully in the car that closed its doors and all suddenly disappeared.

The author of that peculiar St. Valentine's night curled up in a ball in the corner where his forces abandoned him. Although the bodyguard shot him and left him for dead, his strength kept him alive, despite the seriousness of his injuries.

A second ambulance picked him up with a stretcher and left, scratching the asphalt with its golden shimmer.

The National Police Detective Manuel Rosales shows his badge to the uniformed agent that was keeping watch at the door of room 309 of the University Hospital. He greets him in the properly established way, taking his hand to the visor of his cap while his superior enters the room.

The hospital room has two beds, although just one was occupied by a patient. A tall man with an athletic constitution. The sheet with the medical centre's logo covers him to the chest. His torso is bandaged and some greenish plastic tubes come out of his nostrils. At one side of the bed an end table carried the electrical device that was monitoring his vital signs.

Next to the patient, a young and kind of pretty nurse, dressed in a white hospital overall, is in charge of the cleaning and the medical care.

In the back of the room, a window let the daylight in, highlighting the white tones of the furniture and the work clothes. Through the window an, by three medical buildings

enclosed, courtyard could be seen. Leaned on the windowsill, an around thirty year old man, flicks through a file folder. It's the deputy inspector Damián Ferran.

Rosales passes by the bed, greets the nurse and heads to his team member that has stood up from his seat and stretches out his hand to him.

-How's the little angel?- asks Rosales.

-Well, it seems he's a lucky bastard – answers the deputy inspector. He looks like a pincushion, but the doctors say he's going to make it.

-I've got the surgeon report - he continues, as he takes out a typewritten sheet of paper of the file folder.

-He received three gunshots. Calibre 38. Two in the back and one in the shoulder. He had an emergency surgery and now we have to wait to see how he progresses.

-Do we know already who he is? - asked Rosales, looking again at the exhausted body on the bed.

-Yes.

-Angel Yuriovich Leonov. And the funny thing is (because of what you said when you came in) they call him the red angel, the Angel of Death as it seems.

-He's a hitman, a killer hired by the russian mafia trained in the KGB until the collapse of the communism in Russia. Now he sells himself to the best bidder.

-And the best thing is he has spanish ancestors.

-Right! Now they return us our own scum – said Rosales sarcastically.

-And the corpses? - asked Ferran now.

-Three <<respectable businessmen>>. In other words, three capos of the Russian Brotherhood that had a party at the club. Feodor Budienny and his two representatives.

-This Ángel did his job very well and eliminated them quickly. He had a Berretta with an almost empty magazine.

-He also eliminated the establishment's doorman, a brain-damaged numbskull that got in his way.

-He caught him as he ran away, Feodor's bodyguard who was outside, in the car.

Possibly, he caught him by surprise.

-Let me see the medical report.

He took a quick glance on the paper and nodded.

-You see? Two impacts in the back. Yes, he caught him by surprise.

-What I don't know is how he got among the guests, especially carrying a gun.

The deputy inspector, pensive, looked at his boss and said:

-Maybe he frequented the club for a while, like a regular guest. Or maybe he had someone

inside, somebody who worked there.

-Yes. That's possible. Besides, you say he has experience in espionage. I'm sure it wasn't difficult for him to infiltrate the club that way.

-And about the gun- he continued – maybe he hid it the day before. After all, if what you say is true, he knew the establishment and he studied every move.

-He searched where to hide the Berretta. He came to the party and waited until everybody was drunk.

-Yes. Very professional.

-We know what happened outside – he continued telling his subordinate- there are witnesses. Two gardeners who were watering at night came by when the shooting happened. And besides...

-The girl! - exclaimed Ferran snapping his fingers.

Determined, he opened his folder and flicked through the contents until he found what he was looking for.

-Here it is! - he exclaimed again.

-At the crime scene, the paramedics team assisted a girl in shock with an anxiety attack. Possibly one of the business' prostitutes. In the report is written she had her arms covered in blood, but it wasn't hers, she wasn't hurt. So she must have been close to the murdered when they got shot and she got splattered with their blood.

-Well done – said the Inspector -. Check if you can find and talk to her.

-I'll ask the judge for a warrant to search the hole our friend came from. He must be constantly watched. He could be useful for us to solve a lot of murders but I guess that when they find out he's alive, they'll want revenge and eliminate him right here. Give the order to double the surveillance- he ended up saying while he headed to the door.

-Alright, boss.

The deputy inspector Ferran stayed a little longer in the room, looking over his notes and the reports.

Meanwhile, the nurse was taking care of her patient. While she was doing that she observed his face with a certain admiration. Despite his looks in this circumstances he was still very attractive.

The nurse looked at his skin that, despite his forty-five years, had only a few wrinkles and a light grey shadow under the eyes. But the rest of his face still maintained the smoothness of youth.

The hair, light brown, wavy, fell on his face. She moved the locks aside to clean his forehead and uncovered a scar hidden behind his hair, that began on his scalp and went

down a couple of centimetres towards his right temple.

The eyebrows, thick but well drawn and the long eyelashes provided him a shadow that possibly highlighted his gaze. The lids, closed now, hid his blue-grey eyes, with a strange and singular tonality.

-He's a handsome man – said the nurse out loud.

-He possibly was a blond child with an angel face, a cherub - she continued saying sweetly.

-I don't know. He doesn't seem like a heartless killer to me. He looks more like a main character in one of these stories of sad and melancholic knights, one of these romantic, good hearted characters turned evil by his circumstances. One of these hazardous lives, full of tragedies.

-The only tragedy is to bump into him – said Ferran, closing the folder suddenly.