

TORERO

Glenna Holloway

An incarnadine Mexican dawn came before Santos slept. Day of the corrida.

A dark mountain reverberating thunder and sprouting stiff red and yellow flowers waited behind his eyelids. He must strike lightning into a certain crater between the damp ridges before thunder passed him through.

He went early to the rites of preparation, curbing his impatience as his pigtail was attached. He stared so long at his new suit of lights his young apprentice said, "Is something wrong, Santos? Would you prefer the green one?"

"No, Juanito. This is a good choice. The hue of bone, the shade of the bull's horns, gold embroidery and a lining of magenta. The capes will look dramatic against it. And so will the bull's blood."

The staff physician walked up to Santos as he spoke. "I am surprised. You should be at the shore reading your beloved books. I thought I had persuaded you not to return for at least two weeks."

"They expect me today." Santos gestured out the tiny window toward the stands. Already people trickled into what

would be the shady side. "I will not disappoint them."

The doctor scrutinized the slender man before him. "And what of the insomnia and the dizzy headaches?"

"They have left me. I have no complaints."

"Then it is beyond my authority to order you not to fight. But the record will say I did not advise it."

Santos stayed longer than usual in the chapel, steeping in his vow to avenge his brother Miguel with the finest performance of his life, and composing prayers before the Virgin.

Afterward came the hot laughter with his comrades, fear encased in brocade, superstition covered with colors of scorn. Earlier, he had even managed to look at the bulls he drew, and learned one was twin to the hooking horn-wise engine that routed Miguel's soul with a thrust of his right bayonet. It was the same horn that was splintered when the bull bolted over the inside arena wall and rammed the concrete barrier as he was released for the last fight of last Sunday's program.

Now it was time for today's toreros to make the majestic entrance into the ring. Last notes of La Virgen de la Macarena flared from trumpets, eddied through the heat in Santos's head. Shrill musical corkscrews pulled the cuadrillas into the circle of eyes. The stands were packed with thousands of faces, each with ferret eyes.

The gold prisms paving Santos's shoulders ignited in dusty sun. The circle hailed his name, caressed it, intimate as a lover with the sound of it. The other matadors on the ticket did not matter: Santos, Santos, Santos, the congregation began chanting in unison. Something else--treble breeze perhaps, pitched to the trumpets--seemed to hiss his name; the sibilance paced his step, clung to the afterbeat. The two flashing semaphores marching beside him were silent, fierce-smiling their aficionado faces. His name wound back in the bell of a horn or the wind's mouth.

He frowned. The musicians played with too much pathos today. It was better when they blasted, pompous and bawdy, like ponderous heralds of Caesar.

"Dios, we have a gale," growled an assistant. "We will have to drown the capes!"

The wind examined the folded colors, the hair of men and horses.

"Do not work so close, Santos," his banderillero pleaded. "You do not have to paint your belly with the bull's blood. You are here. It is enough."

Layers of ferret eyes probed Santos's pores; the wind stuttered his name. He made no reply.

The first bullfighter was unlucky. It was painful to watch a talented matador attempt to make something out of a cowardly ox. All he could do was finish it quickly, without

style or passion: Doubly disappointing since he had dedicated the paltry creature to the president.

Santos was next. Part of his prayer was that his bulls would not be like Miguel's or like the one being dragged away. As he went through his opening series of passes, Santos did not hear hoofs pulverizing sand, sounds of the watered cape, the olés. His first animal was big, an armed freight train. Soon it was clear that he was honest and direct, a bolder blood-mate than Miguel's damaged and devious one.

Santos heard only wind instruments deciding his dance, humming his mind like wires-- followed by the racking force of his will arcing the ring, entering the pic, bracing it against the picador's old sin of twisting it in neck muscle or withers and stealing the best of his bull.

The initial segment was a trilling time jam, a man unhorsed, esthetically rescued, every player pleasing. And finally the God-lonely bugle retired the picadors, trailing the man/animal cry of all who live awhile in the center of the centrifuge.

Now Santos placed his own banderillas, planted them close, claimed only shallow blood and hide enough to hold. He watched the bull intently, saw an adorned idol carved from legend, raised from a Minoan frieze. He saw his warrior character without latent flaws, watched him size up the

arena, yellow bouquets bobbing against his blackness. Already Santos was certain this bull would not covet the quarter where he quenched his horn in a picador's horse.

Suddenly Santos saw him as a handsome pander, parading, saw himself the same: The two of them in irresistible collusion, peddlers of a nebulous puzzle, together a dark matching piece for the niche behind the ferret eyes.

Santos took the sword and muleta for the last act, the faena. Wind snatched aside the cardinal cloth, exposing a solid target. But this toro chose greatness, his attention trained on the cape.

Santos designed a new pass: A ballet of cerise wing and ivory pivot, a celebration, a black muscle mass, Santos turning, winding wide to spare his partner's spine. Briefly he felt a shimmering hate for Miguel and his curving tricks to crimp his bulls' backs. The pimping wind bared the man again, and Santos drew the swerving horn back to the cloth with an improvised butterfly begun with his left hand. The crowd was ecstatic.

The pase de la muerte fed the rising circle of fever, flared the ferret eyes. The wind gasped, held its breath, puffed away thought, gusted between exquisite passes, reeled around the circle gone hoarse.

Santos, too, was hoarse as he addressed his bull: "I will not let your ears or tail be taken. If the other ubiquitous

beast wishes to bestow trophies, nothing less than a trident of horns and the point of your maleness will do."

Once more Santos heard his name as the bull smeared by, redding his spangles, honing his senses on the nearness of horn and the memory of it stored in his scars. Certain as the bovine stench and bone-rattling sideswipe, he heard it--the voice of another avenger.

Through years of bulls only Santos spoke, his fluent muleta commanding the charges, punishing the pale-hearted, persuading the worthy ones of their chances to plunge their eagerness, telling them at length to bow their heads for the offering, the ritual communion.

Veronicas ago Santos would have laughed or called it a prank of weariness or wind. Did Miguel's bull announce his name aloud?

Santos spat dust from his mouth. He must not succumb to overawe. This was el toro de bandera every true bullfighter hoped for-- measuring the man, releasing his rage only in the attack, keeping his courage and form to the end. The matador could do no less.

He saw the animal's nostrils and eyes streaming grit as he ignored his own. He sculpted the wet cape, made it vault, caress, made it flow. Ads and signs tore off the walls, trash from the stands churned up in bursts. Santos defied it, moving to the brass song in his brain.

Perfect parones, spinning, people thunder, levitating.
Pase de pecho. Perfect. Bull dancer and minotaur.

Time reverted then raced back. Stumbled. Coiled. The
blowing stopped. Santos sighted down his sword.

A bull for recibiendo-- the ultimate tribute and risk--
waiting like a figurine, committed to that stand, waiting
for the dint of the deified charge to sink the espada.
Holding down the triangle head with serge on a stick,
leading it past his sledging chest, trying to remember the
kill would be for Miguel.

The cloth swung forward, beckoned. The bull came. Santos
leaned over the horn with a name cry, rescued his lungs by a
sequin, feet still as stones.

A flawless execution. Except steel and bone collided; the
blade bowed and sprang out of its hot sheath, out of crazed
thunder. The withered flower patch bloomed with new crimson;
the bull mastered desperate legs, flailing his tongue on the
taint in his mouth.

Santos refused to heed his wrist, the shrieked advice. He
retrieved his sword, cursing. The centrifuge screamed and
silenced unheard. He calmed himself in his bowl of sweat and
whiplash chill: "We will have total perfection, si, Diablo?"
A bugle played in his head, an aviso.

The bull summoned him, poised like his bronze kind on the
parapet outside. He posed his invitation low and ready.

Sun flashed along the sword edge, rolling images, icons of the Virgin, faces of his brother, el toro, his brother. Santos moved to the blossoming spot; he felt weightless with new speed. A lesser breeze rose; a bright swatch of last Sunday's poster of Miguel spiraled obliquely toward the matador's eyes.

Triumphant horn lifted as steel drove down, a compound arch. Santos heard his name, heard the wind inside him, heard them fall together.