

# The Old Matador

by Alan Conrad

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The air was clear and still, the space between the mountains silent as a great cathedral. Behind the Sierra Madre Occidental the sun had just set, so the colours of the arid valley were softer and deeper, the steep cliffs on the far side changing in a few minutes from golden amber to shades of rose and purple.

Leaning his forearms on the old wooden fence rail, Martinez thought it was an ideal night for the cattle to be coming in.

The break in the mountain wall through which they would emerge was far to the north and hidden by a protruding cliff, but he knew just where it was and he'd watched the spot patiently for the last hour. Now he made out a small blur at the foot of the cliff, the dust cloud raised by the herd. Minutes later he could see a thin black line at the base of the cloud, the animals themselves.

"I'm getting like the Indians," he thought, smiling to himself. He was thinking of those sun-darkened people with dusty grey feet calloused and cracked from life-times in the desert. They all, even the old ones, had dark glittering eyes that could see to the end of any distance the desert had to offer. It was comforting to think that his own vision was still good, for he was well acquainted with the other restrictions that come with old age.

For twenty-six years, until he'd retired in 2098, he had depended on his eyes, not to see such distant things, but for the close work with the hostile bulls that had shared the arenas of Latin America and Spain with him. The slightest movement, the shiver of a muscle or the flick of an ear, could signal a bull's intention and he'd been so attuned to the animals that way that people had called him '*El Halcon*', the hawk. Sharpness of the eyes had helped him survive more than sixteen hundred bulls without resorting to the cheap tricks relied on by many matadors.

This ranch was the fruit of those years. It included a smaller one that had belonged to his uncle, and from his uncle too he'd inherited the modest herd of fighting cattle that had been in their family for many generations.

After he retired he'd gone out on horseback year after year with Lopez and the others into the desert and the mountains to follow the herds, but now he was too old. Whenever they received an order for cattle, he could only walk out to the fence and watch them come in.

There were no bullfighters now. The legislators at the United Nations had ruled that bullfights were inhumane. "They may know something about inhumanity," Martinez liked to say, "but they know nothing about bullfighting".

He himself had been critical of the old unfairness of the fights, when bulls that had disabled or killed a matador were still doomed, forced to face yet another matador until they were finished off. He had been a member of the reform council that had been instrumental in the 2087 change in the rules that allowed those bulls to exit the ring in triumph, have their wounds treated and dressed, and, when they were healthy again, be released in wilderness locations with four cows. The thousands of wild cattle that inhabited parts of Mexico, Spain and South America now were there because of that. But it hadn't been enough for the non-Spanish world community. The vote terminating the sport forever was history now.

The dispute had been long and emotional, but it didn't bother him anymore.

The herd was drawing closer.

He could just make out the larger heads and powerful shoulders of the bulls, mixed in with many cows and calves. The bulls intended for the ring used to be kept separate, so the few breeding bulls could have the cows to

themselves, but now they all lived together. This was necessary for the herds to develop cohesiveness, but Martinez liked to see them in this natural state for other reasons too.

On the periphery of the herd he could see the smaller forms of the robot shepherds. He couldn't see Lopez, but that didn't concern him, for Lopez would be riding behind the herd, obscured by the dust they raised. The Toyota saleswoman had assured him that the robots could go out alone to find the animals and bring them back. After seven years of using the machines, he had no reason to doubt her, but Lopez had worked for him a long time and understood wild cattle in ways a robot never would.

Martinez still remembered the range intimately, the canyons, the high plateaus, the little hidden springs and the dark green forests on the mountain slopes. He still liked to talk with Lopez about those places, ask him how they had changed from last year, or if they remained the same, and why the animals were grazing in one spot and not another.

Often he'd imagined what it would be like to be one of those young bulls, so strong and quick, roaming the wide desert as the sun rose and set, and grazing at night under the stars.

The stars were coming out now.

He looked up to see Altair, one of the first to be visible and already bright. Not far from it on the left there was a fainter star, invisible to him except in the telescope back at the house, the one that guarded with it the far off planet where these animals were going.

For they had been chosen, like others from his herds before, for one of the new terraformed worlds, one that was ready for large mammals. He had none on Mars, where wild cattle now roamed in the thousands, but he had seven small herds established in other star systems, released from any human ownership, as wild and free as their ancestors had once been. They were all on planets with better gravity than Mars. Many of his rivals' herds had failed, but all of his were known to be holding out.

Since the seventeenth century in Andalusia, his ancestors had been breeding bulls. These cattle of his were a fusion of the Spanish Miura and Martinez breeds combined with some non-pedigree Mexican animals he'd found and liked. They weren't the largest, but they'd suffered from none of that breeding down in size, and for the shorter horn, that had once been necessary for a breeder's bulls to be popular with most of the top matadors.

There were other wild cattle going out to the new worlds too, like the American and European bison, the wildebeest, the cape buffalo, and the Asian gaur. After some genetic tinkering, the gringos were sending some American domestic beef cattle now too. The Germans, in partnership with the British and the French, had completed the reconstruction of the Aurochs from European domestic breeds, the great wild cattle of Northern Europe that had been extinct for centuries, and sent them off as well.

But the Spanish and Latin American animals had been ready and waiting, as wild as ever. Of all the domestic cattle of humankind, only the Spanish fighting animals had retained enough of their original DNA that they were able to survive the hardships of a new wilderness – unfamiliar gravity, extremes of climate and severe terrain, and the predators introduced to control them – without any alteration.

They were almost here now, their black shapes advancing out of the dusk. Mature bulls treaded fearlessly alongside sleek cows, both sexes moving with that mysterious power and grace natural to them. Calves trotted anxiously close to their mothers. The elegant cows looked especially beautiful to Martinez this night. He remembered again the one up in the mountains he and Lopez had watched from his small aircraft years ago. Separated from her herd, with her calf in a small indentation of the cliff behind her, she'd defended it for most of a day from an encroaching pack of wolves. Both mother and calf were still alive and well when Lopez finally reached them on the ground and drove the wolves away.

Lopez was coming now, straight in the saddle and as dusty as his horse. When he passed before the fence, his deeply tanned Indian face gave a slight nod of recognition, which Martinez returned. Lopez was used to living alone in the mountains. Though the company of robots didn't seem to bother him, he never returned easily to the company of people. Martinez knew they would talk tomorrow, or the next day.

His attention returned to the cattle.

One full grown bull stopped about ten meters out from the fence and turned its head to look at him. It was obviously a three year old, the first age at which it could have gone to the ring. Silhouetted in the twilight, it stood dignified and still, its sharp horns curving slightly up at the stars. The way it stared at him gave Martinez that same tightness inside, that same thrill he'd always felt in the ring. As he watched this one, its dark body seemed to take on a deeper blackness, as if it were some emissary from the approaching night.

"Are you one of those?" he whispered.

He meant the ones that would pause in the middle of a fight, not out of fear, just to take stock of things. They were the difficult ones. They didn't make the beautiful fights with the steady charges and flamboyant passes, the kind that made a bullfighter's reputation, but they were the ones you feared. They would stop like that and while you were trying to read their mind they were reading yours. One of them had almost killed him that afternoon in Queretaro.

No, this bull wasn't afraid. The heavy muscular hump over its shoulders remained relaxed and it gave no other sign of anxiety. A less confident animal might have threatened a charge, breaking the spell between them, but this one stood motionless, with the calm courage of the truly brave. When one of the robots approached, it showed no nervousness, but disdainfully resumed a slow walk before the machine reached it, moving off to join the others in the long unexpected journey they would soon undertake.

Intelligence in an animal had never been valued much in the bullfighting world. Many matadors had refused to fight bulls from herds that had a reputation for it, so those who had bred for smaller size had also selected for less intelligence too. They'd made a lot of money doing that, but over time their cattle had deteriorated in strength and character until they weren't acceptable to anyone.

Martinez's family had refused to debase their animals. He liked to think that they had been custodians of this wild race for the past four centuries, preserving them from the corruptions of humanity. If this young bull was smarter, stronger and faster because of their care, weren't those just the traits that it would need in its quest to establish its kind on a less hospitable planet?

"Buena suerte," he called to it as it walked away.

Then he added softly, "I wish I could go with you."

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