

Diego Romero, Spain's top torero, bullfighter, walked alone along the timber-paneled corridor of The Royal Taurino Society's offices on his way to the inner sanctuary, the committee room of bullfighting's watchdog, where the decisions of eight men defined and controlled all aspects of Spain's national tradition. He was twenty-six years old, of average height with film star looks. He had a chiseled physique, with long dark hair tidied into a ponytail and penetrating brown-eyes that missed nothing. He'd dressed in his trademark white linen suit, white open-necked shirt, brown brogue shoes and carried a backpack which contained his phone, laptop, chargers, and a water bottle. His footsteps echoed on the rose-pink marble tiling.

Mounted on both walls were illuminated framed paintings of varying dimensions. They were portraits of famous toreros going back over the centuries. His distant ancestor, Pedro Romero was there, his late father Jaime and Uncle Juan, along with El Cordobes, Juan Belmonte, and Antonio Ordoñez. Further along were the recently gored Victor Barrio and poor Ivan Fandiño, who had the misfortune to trip on his cape at the *Corrida des Fetes in Aire-sur-l'Adour*, France. The bull had been merciless.

"One day I will join them," he whispered to himself. "But God willing, not just yet."

He took a seat on a row of wooden chairs lined up outside the imposing committee room door, feeling humbled by the exalted display of his predecessors. The bile rose in his stomach. He swallowed, grimaced and tapped his fingers on the back of the chair. After a moment, he stood up to look out of the single window to *Puerta del Sol* four floors below. He smiled wryly to himself. The participants in the semi-naked demonstration had swelled to more than he could have possibly envisaged.

He sat back down, pulse racing, thoughts all over the place. Initially, the committee had refused his request to make a presentation about the state of bullfighting and some suggestions to modernize it. They were already familiar with his ideas from the bullfighting media, strongly disagreed with them and were reluctant to waste time discussing the subject with him. Diego concluded that they preferred to bury their heads in the sand rather than acknowledge the groundswell of public opinion against their art. In the end, he'd had to threaten them with his resignation. He'd known that the Society's finances were in dire straits and that his withdrawal from the bullring would open the floodgates to even more sponsors pulling the plug.

They'd finally agreed to give him fifteen minutes.

The door opened and a hand beckoned him inside. Diego rose and strode purposefully into the room. Eight elegantly dressed, elderly distinguished men sat in a row behind a rectangular table covered with a white tablecloth, jugs of water, glasses, note-pads, and pens. No phones or devices were anywhere in sight. Behind them on the timber-paneled wall hung a huge painting of the Spanish Monarch mounted in an ornate gilt frame. Diego looked at each man and nodded as he went along the line. In his mind, he reeled off their individual businesses: Escobedo; Olive oil, Dorantes; wine, Lorenzo; fashion, Agustin; shipping, Bosque; hotels, Zambrano; wind-turbines, Quintanilla; solar-energy, Pizarro; international engineering. Their combined worth was almost greater than the majority of the Spanish population.

Diego's father had known them all well before he died of old chest wounds the previous year. The Chairman of the Society, Pablo Bosque, the largest hotel owner in Spain was married to Diego's fiancée's aunt, the Duquesa de Aragon. His own fiancée was the Condesa de Aragon. Both smart, beautiful women with fearsome reputations for their passionate support of good causes. Much to the Romero family's disdain, both the Duquesa and Condesa were vehemently opposed to bullfighting. The Condesa had only accepted Diego's marriage proposal, on the basis that until he retired from the ring, there would be no wedding or physical relations.

The world of slaughtering noble beasts in public, maybe an incestuous business in which Diego

was well connected and highly favored, but in this room, that would cut no ice. This small group of powerful and ruthless men totally controlled bullfighting.

“Buenos días señores,” said Diego as he walked toward them slipping off his backpack and placing it by the solitary chair facing the men.

Not one of them acknowledged Diego’s greeting. Cold, inscrutable faces were staring hard at him as if he was nothing.

“Please take a seat, Diego,” said the chairman. “I’m sure there’s no need to remind you of the time limit. However, I must warn you that should we become displeased with what you are saying, we will cut you short. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Don Bosque. However, I prefer to stand.”

“As you wish. Please begin.”

“I have no desire to appear arrogant or disrespectful,” said Diego, feeling more confident now that he was talking. “However, I am one of the best toreros in Spain and my appearance at any bullring guarantees a backside on every seat and that sponsorship income is maximized. The point being, that I have the right to stand before you and speak about the state of our beloved national tradition.”

He paused to measure the effect of his words. Not a frown or grunt, just eight inscrutable gazes staring straight at him.

“On the face of it,” he continued. “Bullfighting appears to be booming. When I talk to my colleagues, they all say how well they are doing. Ranchers and Restaurateurs gush volubly about their successful businesses. When I read the Spanish press, their articles describe a wonderful world that is so far away from reality, I wonder if I’m on the same planet. Gentlemen, you and I know that bullfighting is practically dead in the water.”

Diego walked around the room as he talked, waving his arms to emphasize his points.

“This is the twenty-first century. The age of fairness and equal opportunity for all regardless of age, color, gender, or sexual orientation. So señores, where are the female bullfighters? Unsurprisingly, they are still barred from qualifying. Cast an eye around this splendid old room. What do you see? Old men using bullfighting to further their business interests. As far as you’re concerned,” Diego strode quickly over to the window and pointed down to the square. “Those brave bare-breasted whippersnappers out there who are the future of our country whether we like it or not can go fuck themselves.”

Diego paused to gauge their reaction, worried that he was overdoing it. He sensed the tension rising. Teeth, no matter whether gold, ceramic or real, were being sucked.

“If you compare the technology in today’s car,” he continued. “With those from even ten years ago, it is unrecognizable as we head towards carbon-free vehicles. My grandmother refuses to use a smartphone preferring the old models with a circular dial on the front. Most of her grandchildren think that it is just another of her many antiques. Yet bullfighting remains exactly the same today, as it was twenty, even thirty years ago. Nothing has changed while the rest of the world is transforming itself so quickly that the technology we learn at university is already out of date by the time we leave.

“Why is that relevant? I hear you ask yourselves.

“Nobody under the age of forty-five goes to or shows any interest in supporting bullfighting. Apart from attendance at my own performances, spectator numbers have fallen by fifty-two percent since 2007, the forecast is that the trend will continue dramatically downwards.

“TV stations no longer broadcast bullfights, advertising revenue has vanished. Red-meat consumers are disappearing faster than lemmings over a cliff, despite our feeble efforts to eliminate hormones and factory farming. As our rivers and oceans are poisoned or choked by a growing mountain of plastic, a vegan world dominated by animal lovers and green disciples is rapidly approaching. Already, traditional bullfighting restaurants are closing and cattle-ranches are going bankrupt.

“Attracting new talent to bullfighting schools has become almost impossible. There are less

than three students in classes of what used to be thirty. The schools have to rely on Government grants to stay open. This, esteemed gentlemen is the current state of our beloved industry and these are not my statistics. A recent poll found that only twenty-nine percent of the Spanish population support bullfighting and three-quarters have not attended a fight during the previous five years.

“Señores, at this rate, bullfighting will be dead in ten years. This Society will no longer be necessary, your historical power center, i.e. this committee room will become surplus to requirements and those portraits of our heroes in the corridor outside will be condemned to a dusty museum shelf somewhere. Our bullrings are likely to become venues for pop-concerts or, perish the thought, be converted into another architectural monstrosity, such as the shopping mall in Barcelona. Gentlemen, our country’s national culture would have disappeared. Over five hundred years of tradition vanished, whoosh, gone like a puff of smoke.

“You can imagine how affronted my ancestors would feel after centuries of putting our bodies on the line, especially the many who lost their lives building this industry. Your old friend Jaime Romero, my father included. We cannot sit by and do nothing. We will not lie down and let it happen. We must do something to save bullfighting.”

“And your proposal is?” interrupted the chairman.

“Or your fiancée’s?” muttered Dorantes.

Diego ignored the remark. “The single biggest objection among the young is that we are killing animals for fun. This association with animal cruelty is finishing us off. I respectfully suggest that we take the blood out of the equation. No more picadores stabbing the bull with a lance or banderilleros sticking darts in its back, and, more crucially we must stop killing the bull in the ring. Yes, I know that the wretched beast will be butchered in the shed at the back afterward, but the audience won’t be aware of that, and out of sight is out of mind. The spectator should remember a brave beast for its noble performance, not its death rattle.”

“Young fellow, I should not need to remind you,” interrupted Pizarro shouting. “That we are talking about bullfighting. The objective is and has been for hundreds of years to kill the damn animal so we can eat it. Without blood, there can be no killing and no food. On the other hand, perhaps you would prefer to convert our national heritage into a circus act, like the Portuguese cavaleros and forcados with their absurd wrestling. For me, they show no respect for the bull. Personally, I refuse to listen further if that is your argument.”