

The Choice

by Adam McGillen

"It's not a sport," Isabella said. "There are no winners."

Colt lay on his back, their blanket spread on the prairie floor beneath a brutal blue sky. He closed his eyes and laced his fingers behind his head while his black Stetson hat rested on his chest. He listened to Isabella's lips move over each word. She filled his language with music all her own.

"Someone always wins," he said. "And someone always loses. Call it a draw, sure, but anyone who's seen a fight knows there's always a winner."

"You don't get it," she said.

Colt rolled to his side and his hat tumbled onto the blanket. He gazed at Isabella. She sat with her knees to her chest and her arms locked around her legs, facing away from him. Dark strands of her hair skipped along the thin line of smooth brown skin that shown where the hem of her shirt and the waist of her jeans slid apart as she leaned into her legs.

She looked over her shoulder at Colt and his heart trembled. The dust of the prairie never clung to her face like it did to his. He wanted to reach out and feel the smooth skin of her cheeks, but he could see her father flying into a rage at the sight of Colt's dirty finger-print on her face.

"I want to understand," Colt said. "Just keep talking and I'll get it."

"It's just something you have to see, Osito."

Her lips stretched and Colt saw a flash of white teeth just before she turned away and let her hair fall across her face.

“Preciosa,” he said.

She laughed quietly. He couldn't get the word to flow like she had taught him.

“C'mon,” he said, “tell me about the bulls.”

“We should be heading back. Mi padre, he will be home soon.”

Colt felt the weight of reality crash on them. Their time together always seemed so short, and imagining the next few days apart always sucked the wind out of Colt's chest. He could see the change in Isabella too. She pulled her knees even closer to her chest and looked out across the horizon as her smile faded. Her shoulders rose and fell with a silent sigh.

Colt stood up and donned his hat. He was tall now. Finally taller than his father, and her father too. The curled brim of his hat cast a shadow over the smooth features of his face. His shoulders were broad and the sleeves of his plaid shirt were rolled tightly around expanding arms. He reached down and Isabella slid her hand into his and rose from the prairie floor.

Colt clicked his tongue.

“Clavo, git! Let's go, boy,” he said.

The horse had drifted away from their blanket. He stood over a dry patch of dead grass, pulling at the crisp brown strands.

“Clavo! C'mon now!”

“Stop. You know he only listens to me,” Isabella said as she wrapped her fingers around Colt's forearm. “Clavo, here boy.”

The horse stopped eating and walked lazily toward them. Colt shook his head and grabbed the blanket from the prairie floor. He rolled the blanket and hung it from the saddle on Clavo's back. Isabella slipped her boot into the stirrup and Colt placed his hands on her back and helped her onto the horse. Tiny yellow clouds rose around Clavo's hooves. He lifted his head toward the western horizon where the sinking sun lit a distant thunderhead ablaze in gold and crimson.

Colt spat into the dust and placed his hand on Clavo's long muzzle.

“I take it you're just itchin' to get going, huh?”

Isabella watched from atop the horse. Clavo lifted his face again and blew a rush of air from his nose.

“Yeah, I seen it,” Colt said.

The large muscles in Clavo's neck trembled.

Isabella leaned forward in the saddle and ran her hand down Clavo's mane.

“Sé fuerte mi amigo,” she whispered to the horse.

“I don't know how I got stuck with the likes of you, Clavo. Damn coward.”

“Stop that,” Isabella said. “Let's get him home. Okay?”

Colt took the lead line and turned his horse to the northeast and began walking toward the Garcia Ranch.

Thunder rolled across the prairie behind them. The air pressed down on them as they plodded along in silence toward home.

“Tell me about Pamplona,” Colt said without turning.

And she did. She told him the stories that her father had told her. Dangerous stories of fearless men running down slick stone streets, bulls rumbling at their backs.

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It was nearly dark when Isabella kissed Colt on the cheek and sprinted away toward her father's house, leaving a trail of dust behind her and never looking back. Colt climbed into the saddle and watched as she disappeared into the darkness of the house. He could hear the low rumble of Rodrigo's truck in the distance and he could see the glow of the headlamps behind the small hill to the north. Colt kicked Clavo into a sprint and they hurried across the prairie toward the dilapidated barn and tiny house in the distance. They cut an indirect path, sweeping to the north to put a patch of trees between them and the road. Colt looked back and saw the truck already working its way down the nearside of the hill.

“You think he saw us?”

Clavo had no answer.

When the storm clouds finally slid overhead, they unleashed a torrent of fat and cold rain drops. The ground had hardened and cracked from months without rain and the falling water pooled on the surface and splashed beneath Clavo's hooves. Colt stepped down as they came to the barn and took the lead line to bring Clavo into the barn. When the rain came it always came hard and fast and then left in a hurry. Inside the barn, weathered boards squealed against loose nails. Lightning snapped nearby and the flash threw shadows across the barn. Clavo reared onto his hind legs, squealing as the

thunder roared overhead. One stiff tug on the reins and Colt pulled the horse back to earth.

"C'mon now, you're alright," Colt said. "Easy. Easy now."

Colt ran his hand up and down the length of Clavo's neck as they walked toward the only stall with a rusty name-tag on the door. The roof was riddled with leaks and the barn provided little shelter from the storm's wrath. Clavo stopped trembling as they stepped into his empty stall and Colt began removing the saddle and reins. Colt held the lasso rope for a moment, tracing the stiff and faded threads with his fingers. He hung all the gear in the tack-room and took the saturated roll of blanket and returned to Clavo. As Colt unrolled the blanket and hung it over the stall door, Clavo stepped forward and knocked Colt's hat eschew with his nose.

Colt smiled, tipped his hat back and put his face against the horse's. He cupped his hands atop the horse's broad nose and put his mouth to the small opening between his thumbs. He blew gently and looked straight into Clavo's eyes. The horse's hooves settled into the sawdust that lined the floor of the stall. Dirty little pools of rain and sweat formed beneath the glistening horse. Clavo's eyes focused and Colt stared at his dual reflections.

Clavo was mahogany all over, except for the white line that ran up the length of his nose and ended where it was crossed by another white line between his eyes. The nail-shaped patch was the only bit of white on the horse's body. Isabella had seen it when Clavo was just a baby. She had traced the white lines with her fingers and said, "Clavo," and Colt knew that the horse had been named.

"What do you think? We gonna see Isabella tomorrow?"

Clavo stared at Colt over the stall door. Colt pet the horse one last time and then turned and walked from the barn in silence.

The rain had already thinned into the piercing drops that signalled the storm would pass soon. Colt trudged back through the mud for the house and stripped his boots on the porch. Three dry and dusty pairs of boots sat by the door where he set his. From the porch he could see the edge of the storm was not far off. He stepped into the house in his socks. Soft, hollow sounds rose from the wooden floor as he sought the kitchen at the end of the main hall. The smell of ham and okra lofted above him.

“Well if it ain't Colt. Just in time, no less.”

“Evening, Pa. Sorry. You know how Clavo gets when it gets to storming like this.”

“Yeah, and you know how Clavo gets too, so you damn well know better than to keep him out there.”

“Yessir.”

Colt sat in his place as his mother set the meal on the table. His younger sister sat across from him and stared, fork and knife in hand.

“What you starin' at Maggie?”

“Nothin',” she said as she began to saw away at the ham.

The meat was overcooked and dry. Maggie's tiny and pale hands struggled to wield the knife. Colt focused on his own meal. He took great hulking bites from the ham. Everything tasted like dirt. The dust found it's way into everything.

“How'd it go today?” his father asked.

Colt stuffed a load of okra into his mouth to delay having to answer. His father folded the corner of his newspaper down and glared across the table.

“Be nice to have some live cattle to train on now and then,” Colt said.

“How many times I gotta tell you to give up that dumb fuckin' dream? Huh? Your happiness ain't anything I'm worried about.”

The corner of the paper rose again to conceal his father. Colt shoved the last slice of ham into his mouth, forked the last of his okra in after it and sent it all down with great gulps of his milk. He sat staring at the back of the broadsheet.

Headlines on the paper exclaimed economic woes. Thousands of miles away men were screaming over falling numbers, but it was the drought and the enormous black dust storms that had everyone on edge in Texas. Colt's father sat and read the paper every night, muttering about the world just going to shit.

“I saw Rodrigo in town today,” his father said.

Colt's chest tightened. The fork quivered in his hand. He waited.

“You shouldn't be sneaking off with his daughter when he ain't around. You hear me? What good is gonna come of that?”

His father turned to the next page.

“No good, that's what's gonna come of it,” he said as he snapped the paper to get the fold to settle into place.

Colt looked down at the floor boards, away from his family. He took a deep breath and curled his hands into trembling fists.

“You want some live cattle, huh?” his father said.

Colt held the air in his lungs for a moment.

“Yeah,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Well, old Rodrigo said their prize bull tore-ass right through that big expensive fence of his. He ain't seen the sonofabitch since they found the boards all blasted through this morning.”

Colt stared at the newspaper. He unclenched his fists and looked out the western window toward the Garcia property. It was concealed in darkness. Isabella hadn't mentioned anything about a bull breaking loose.

“Garcia breeds those things for bullfightin' down in Mexico, ya know,” his father said. “Big bulls. Bad bulls. Bulls that ain't afraid of shit. Their last one killed a man. From what Rodrigo said, I guess the dumb amigo tripped over his little red blanket. Bull put its horn right through his neck.”

The newspaper never moved.

Maggie coughed raggedly into her brown napkin, leaving a dark stain like she had expelled soot. Colt's mother watched with distant and hard dark eyes. Colt wanted to storm out, but instead he peered out the western window as his father spoke.

“You find that bull and you got yourself some real live cattle. See how much you go dreamin' after meetin' a bull like that—one bred to kill little punks like you.”

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It was still dark when Colt rose, dressed and headed for the barn. He passed the door to his parents' room where his father snored so loud he swore the walls shook. Clavo stood expectantly at the door of his stall when Colt entered.

“Morning,” Colt said. He saddled Clavo and hung the lasso rope around the knob of the saddle. Clavo watched Colt's every move.

As they rode out from the barn the sun straddled the eastern horizon and turned the sky a stretched gradient of blues. Colt turned Clavo toward the darkest shades to the west. The sky clear across the world was empty of clouds.

Colt finished checking the fence lines around the property before noon. The land had long been empty of opportunity, but the chore offered him an opportunity to ride and live apart. The trip around the property always began and ended at the gate to the adjacent Garcia Farm, where Colt could see the immense house and barn that sat beside a small patch of woods in the distance. The Chevy was parked by the house. Rodrigo was home.

Colt gnawed at a dried piece of ham and scanned the horizon. With a sigh he slipped a boot from its stirrup and kicked at the latch on the gate. His whole body felt heavy, as if he were tethered to the earth and it was pulling against his advance. Sweat formed on his hands and Colt realized he was clutching the reins so tight that his knuckles were white.

Isabella stepped from the house onto the expansive porch as Colt rode up. When she saw Colt she stood stunned, her whole body froze. Colt put a finger to the brim of his hat and tilted it forward in greeting. Isabella crossed her arms and angled her head toward the empty truck beside the house. Colt smiled.

"Howdy miss," Colt said. "Is your pa around?"

Isabella pursed her lips and tightened her eyes. Clavo stepped sideways and Colt felt the horse trembling against his legs. Or was it his own legs shaking?

"Howdy Colt," Rodrigo Garcia said as he stepped out onto the porch behind his daughter. Cavernous wrinkles stretched from the corners of his eyes and mouth. "What brings you over?"

"Howdy, sir," Colt tipped his hat again. "I hear y'all are missing a bull."

Isabella spun on her foot and snatched a broom from its place against the side of the house. Garcia glanced at her as she began to sweep the dust from the porch with vicious strokes. With a shrug Garcia turned back to Colt.

"You heard right, son," Garcia said with a nod toward the distant fence line to the south. "Bull busted right through the best damn fence money can buy. What about it?"

Colt leaned forward, running his hand up and down Clavo's neck. "I was thinking we could help y'all out."

Isabella halted.

"Sounds to me like you ain't done enough thinking," Garcia said.

The sweeping continued with renewed determination. Dust billowed out into the yard.

"C'mon Colt, your father told me about your wantin' to rodeo, but this bull ain't nothing to play around with."

“No, sir, I know that. I'll just head out the way the bull went. Keep my distance. See if I can't spot him and give you an idea of where to round him up.”

Colt offered a smile to Garcia. Isabella slowed her furious pace as she approached the far edge of the porch.

Garcia shook his head.

“That's quite all right, son. We'll handle it.”

“I'm not asking for money, sir,” Colt said. “Just wanted to volunteer my services.”

Garcia chuckled and continued to shake his head. Colt's face was set in determination.

“You ain't asking for money, huh? Well then what are you asking for? This ain't any bull you want to go learnin' on, Colt. Pure hatred. I can't be sending any child after this—”

“I ain't a child, sir.”

“Pardon me, son. I know you ain't. But the fact remains, this bull ain't seen a man or a horse but from a mighty long distance. He's got it in his horned head that he's king, and he's not going to take kindly to your company. I can assure you that. Leave it to us. We'll get him home.”

Isabella finally turned at the end of the porch and shot a fierce look at Colt atop his horse. Colt sensed her glaring eyes but resisted the temptation to turn.

“Well, sir, I guess I best be gettin' back to my chores then. But if I see your bull, I'll be sure to let you know.”

“Don't you go doing nothing stupid, Colt. If you do see that bull, you keep your distance. You come right back here.”

Colt told Garcia to take care and turned Clavo away from the house. At the gate Colt looked back and saw Garcia hauling supplies out of the enormous barn. Isabella was sitting on the edge of the porch. Colt put a finger to the brim of his hat again and watched Isabella stand and disappear within the house. As he guided Clavo through the gate his spine stiffened under her gaze.

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Colt had seen the break in the fence-line of the Garcia property before he had left. Colt continued east until the Garcia house had dipped below the horizon, then he turned Clavo south.

The day's sun had all but erased the prior night's rain. Colt scanned the horizon for any sign of dust rising. He leaned forward in his saddle and sighed as he stroked the broad side of Clavo's neck.

“Where's that bull gone to?”

Clavo lowered his head and searched the dry ground for stray leaves of grass.

A lone shade tree stood off in the distance upon a small rise in the prairie. Colt pulled on the reins and turned Clavo toward the tree. He set Clavo into a steady gallop with a couple gentle kicks from his heels. The two had learned to ride together and Colt rode so smooth that the saddle seemed a throne. They crested the small hill and stopped beneath the shade tree just as the sun turned red in its descent toward the western horizon.

Colt let go of the reins and sat back in the saddle while Clavo nibbled at the small patch of pale grass beneath the tree. The trunk of the tree was massive, but the faded bark and the bare branches showed that this drought could be the old tree's last.

Clavo worked his way slowly around the tree, eating what little grass was available. Colt was reworking the knot on his lasso rope when he felt Clavo's ribs quake against his ankles. He looked up.

The bull had flesh of a deep red that turned black where the massive muscles knotted. Colt thought of the way blood turns black when it pools too deep. There was nothing but muscle, an intricate network of coarse fibers woven tightly and wrapped in a thin layer of flesh ready to burst. The flesh funneled out into the massive neck—there were the muscles responsible for thrusting the two incredible white horns that grew out of the bull's head. Colt had never seen anything so white. Such purity seemed so out of place.

The bull stood with his back to Colt and his horse. It took no notice of their arrival. Clavo took heaving breaths beneath Colt and began to step backwards. Colt's heart pulsed within his chest. He had expected to see the bull from a great distance across the prairie. He had not expected to make first sight from just 30 yards away.

Clavo huffed and Colt hurriedly leaned forward and tried to soothe the horse.

The bull lurched in its stance like an angry drunk. It turned. Clavo seized and Colt felt the horse's body quake to its core. The bull ducked its head, putting its nose to the ground and releasing a burst of hot air. A cloud of dust grew around the bull's face. The muscles in the bull's neck flexed and it thrust its horns toward the sky.

“The worst bulls are the bulls that scrape the floor of the arena and huff and feint,” Isabella had said. “They are cowards.”

Clavo reared onto his hind legs. Colt thrust his feet forward in search of his stirrups, but found nothing as he slipped back in the saddle and spilled onto the prairie floor.

A piercing crack sounded from Colt's leg. He cried out and Clavo tore off back down the hill, hooves slipping in the dust.

Colt swore at the solitary rock that sat peacefully beside his shattered knee. His jeans were torn straight through. Blood spilled from the open wound. Colt's stomach rolled when he saw the white of his bone deep in the gash and the little white pieces of his kneecap flowing away in the steady stream of crimson.

“You fuckin' son of a—” Colt shouted into the distance after Clavo, picking up a fistful of dirt and hurling it after the fleeing horse. The effort was too much and the pain in his knee roared.

The bull stood motionless.

Colt unbuttoned his shirt slowly, keeping his leg still and his eyes on the bull. It was content to stand there and watch him suffer. Sitting there in his dirty white undershirt, Colt wrapped the sleeves of his plaid shirt around his thigh, gritted his teeth and pulled the knot tight. He fell back against the earth and choked on the pain, coughing as the tears came to his eyes.

Another great huff came from the bull.

Colt sat up to look at the bull.

“The crowds,” Isabella had said, “they boo and shout at the bulls who just stand and make a show of their own. They came to see a

bull that charges without hesitation.”

The bull ducked its head again and Colt saw how it favored its right horn, the way it twisted its head just slightly to pull the right horn back, ready to strike. The bull kicked at the prairie floor.

“When the matador is ready for the kill, he aims his sword right here,” she had said and her fingers had felt so soft on the back of Colt's neck. She ran them horizontally across the line of his hair and then down his neck to where the first bump of his spine protruded between his shoulders. Her touch a concentrated breeze.

Colt watched the bull duck its head and saw again the enormous mass of muscle at the top of the neck. All that hellish force behind those pure white horns.

Colt closed his eyes.

“The greatest bullfighters, they show no fear. They control the bull so well on each pass that a horn might rip the seam of their pants. And when the matador knows the bull, then it is time to kill. He should not thrust his blade. Cobarde!”

“Cobarde?” he had asked.

“Thrusting is cowardly,” she had explained. “You only win the tail for the finest kills. The matador should control the bull so well that he guides the bull onto the blade with a single attempt. If the matador has no fear and holds his blade steady and aims properly, the bull will charge and the blade will enter.” She tapped the base of his neck and then drew her finger around to his chest. “And it will go straight to the heart,” she had said, pressing her open palm against his chest.

Colt's heart had been racing then as it was now.

He opened his eyes and saw the bull react. It lowered its head, twisted its neck to the right and began its charge.

Colt clenched his eyes shut again. He could hear the pounding of hooves all around him. The earth quaked beneath him with the thundering force of the beast.

Just as the rumbling overcame him, he braced and heard the guttural squealing before he felt it. He thought for a moment that he must already be dead, somehow disconnected from his own suffering.

He opened his eyes to find Clavo. The horse's legs were kicking wildly above the ground. The bull's right horn had passed entirely through the broadside of Clavo's belly. Colt could see the pointed tip sticking through, stained red. The left horn was hooked under Clavo's front legs and the horse writhed in pain as the bull held it off the ground.

Colt sat in the dust and looked at the fear in Clavo's eye.

The bull struggled under the weight of the horse, which had turned the bull's head to an awkward angle. The bull's hooves began to slip in the dirt and the bull dropped its head low. Clavo was dead weight now and could not support himself—his legs folded and the full weight of Clavo pushed the bull's chin into the ground. The bull tried to step backwards and remove the embedded horn, but it had hooked around Clavo's rib cage and would not budge. The bull merely dragged the dying horse through the dust. The horn would not come loose.

After two quick tugs to escape, the bull was filled with renewed rage. It braced and heaved Clavo into the air again. Colt yelled out

and tried to stand but collapsed back to the earth clutching his destroyed knee. Clavo unleashed a low groan and went limp.

The bull collapsed.

Colt crawled to his horse as the bull lay with its neck twisted and its hulking mass heaving with each breath.

Colt placed his arm around Clavo, felt the muscles no longer trembling. His reflection shone in the dark eyes that flicked back and forth. Colt's tears spilled onto the horse's tattered flesh and trickled into the blood and gore, cascading together down into the dust in pools of deep red.

The sun set and all the sky turned black. There was no moon, only stars. The boy clutched his horse until he stopped sobbing. The bull slept, waking only to attempt another escape before collapsing again from the wasted effort. Colt lay with his head against Clavo's still belly and stared up at the sky. The bull took long, steady breaths as it slept behind the boy. It snored.

When dawn came, Colt heard the truck rumbling in the distance. He sat up, wincing at the throbbing in his knee. Standing in the bed of the truck he saw Isabella. Her dark hair flowed behind her in waves as she clung to the gun rack. The truck turned off the dirt road and began to cut a path straight toward the pile of bodies and Colt could see his father in the passenger seat.

When they pulled up, Colt was standing on his one good leg. His heart did not tremble.

