

Everything or nothing at all - Revised Version

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Chapter 1

“Lancers!” The alcalde shouted, but they didn't come. They had already been disarmed by Zorro and it turned out to be the same duel between him and his archenemy Zorro.

Zorro reached for his sword when he suddenly his hand started to shake making it impossible for him to close his grip. Folding his hands across his chest to hide them, he approached the alcalde unarmed.

“Looking for your lancers, alcalde?” Zorro teased him. “I'm afraid they are unable to assist you. Do you really want to fight me again? Why don't you just rescind the taxes and save us the effort?”

“Never! I'll never give up this easily,” the alcalde retorted with his sword in hand.

Fortunately for Zorro the short wordplay had been long enough and his hands no longer shook. He grabbed his sword and saluted as usual. “As you wish, alcalde.” Afraid the shaking spell might return, Zorro used his skill to disarm the alcalde as fast as he could, without playing with him first. After he had decorated the alcalde's vest with his Z and made him rescind the tax, he turned to Victoria to kiss her hand. “Beautiful as ever,” he complimented her and was rewarded by her smile. Quickly he mounted Toronado and rode home to the cave.

After he had returned and changed, Diego examined his hand, flexing and stretching his fingers, but everything was fine again. He couldn't explain what had happened and he decided that it must have been just a cramp in his hand.

Some days later he was reading a book in the library when his hands began to shake again and he felt dizzy. In his surprise he let the book fall down to floor. The noise made Felipe come looking. “Everything is fine Felipe, just a book that fell down.”

The next time he was writing something at the desk in his cave and the quill in his shaking hand made lines all over the paper because he couldn't control it. In his effort to put the quill back to its holder he additionally knocked over the ink pot, spilling the ink all over his desk. Utterly frustrated he shoved everything down to the floor.

Felipe who had heard the noise in the library found him bent forward with his head on his desk while he waited for the shaking and the dizziness to pass.

Looking at the mess all around him, Felipe shook his arm confused, asking what had happened. “Everything is fine, Felipe. I was just writing a letter when my hands started shaking again.” Diego explained. “I'm sorry for the mess.”

Felipe looked at him alarmed. 'Your hands were shaking? Again? What do you mean with again? It has happened before?'

“I'm sorry, Felipe, I didn't want to upset you.” Diego cursed himself for his slip of tongue.

'Have you been to a doctor?'

“No, I haven't consulted one. I read my books, but I didn't find anything.”

'You should talk to Dr. Hernandez, promise.'

“I will go to a doctor, but not to Dr. Hernandez. I can't let him examine me, because he might find out that I'm Zorro and I can't risk that.”

'Who else?'

“I'll go to Dr. Fernandez in San Pedro where I'm less known than here in Los Angeles. I heard that he is quite able in his job and he has a broad knowledge about the strangest illnesses since he has to deal regularly with foreigners who arrive in the port of San Pedro.”

'Tomorrow! Promise!'

“Yes, Felipe, I promise. And now we should take care of that mess.”

While Felipe got a broom, Diego picked up the items from his desk that he had swept down in his frustration.

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The doctor in San Pedro Diego consulted the next day proved as capable as his reputation promised. He examined Diego thoroughly, asking him about previous injuries and illnesses, but still he was at loss with the symptoms. There were several illnesses that fit to one symptom or the other both nothing match them all. Dr. Fernandez asked Diego to return again while he tried to figure out his illness.

At his next visit a week later the doctor went through his medical history again. “Is there something you have forgotten to tell me, Señor?” Dr. Fernandez asked. “I couldn't match an illness to your symptoms. To me it looks as if you have been poisoned.”

Surprised Diego looked at him. “I have been poisoned, but that was three years ago. I took the antidote in time.”

“You must know that some poisons have lingering effects that manifest only much later after the actual poisoning.”

Together with the doctor Diego went through everything that happened when he was poisoned by Palomarez without revealing his role as Zorro. The poison, the time it took to show its effects, the symptoms he suffered from and the time that passed until he took the antidote.

“Señor, it seems like your case is very complicated. I'm not an expert on these poisons from the Amazonian jungle. I will need to consult with some of my colleagues. Unfortunately this will take time that you may not have to lose, but it is all I can do for you. If I'm right with my assumption, your shaking spells and dizziness will increase and you may suffer from blindness too. I strongly recommend you to refrain from any dangerous activities. Any information about the poison you have would be useful. If you manage to extract the ingredients in you laboratory, then it would be a great help.”

“Anything else I can do?” Diego was shocked. He had thought to have successfully cured the poisoning after he drank the antidote.

“I'd look for the antidote, it may help you with your spells and some of the symptoms. I'll get back to you as soon as I have new information to you.” Dr. Fernandez shook his hand and guided him out the room, not hiding his concern for his patient.

On the ride back from San Pedro Diego was in a thoughtful mood. How could he continue as Zorro if he could be surprised by spells at any time? He needed to lay low until the doctor found a cure for his problems. Hopefully the alcalde would behave in the near future and he had to leave the patrolling of the area for bandits to Mendoza and his soldiers.

Most important now was to find out everything about the poison and extract some of the antidote from the cactus flower.

The next days Diego was busy in his laboratory, trying to analyze the poison from the the sample he had gotten from Palomarez. In addition he rode out in search for the rare cactus flower that contained the antidote.

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On one of his following visits some weeks later, the doctor could finally give him a diagnosis.

On his ride home he was so shocked that he could hardly concentrate. After he had taken his horse to the stables he headed straight for the cave where Felipe found him later.

Diego knew he could no longer keep the truth from Felipe. Quietly he informed him about the doctor's diagnosis.

“Felipe, I'll have to leave tomorrow with the coach to Mexico, but I'll be back as soon as I can.” Diego patted him on the shoulder, but Felipe looked at him accusingly. 'You lied, you lied to me. You told me that I wasn't so bad. How can I believe you now?'

“Felipe, I'm sorry, but I didn't want you to worry.”

'You will leave me, just like my parents left me.' Felipe crouched down at the floor burying his head on his knees. Sitting down next to him on the floor, Diego took him in his arms as he had done so often when Felipe had been a child.

“Felipe, no more lies.” Felipe looked at Diego expectantly through his tears. “If I promised you that everything will be fine, it'd be a lie. But I can promise you one thing, I'll do my best.” Diego tried to cheer him up.

Felipe grabbed Diego at his arms. 'I want to come with you!'

“Felipe, you can't.”

'Why not? I can help you and take care of you as I did when Zorro was injured!'

“I will be cared for in Mexico and I need you here. You're the only one Toronado lets approach besides me and someone has to take care of everything here. Do you want Toronado to suffer?”

Felipe shook his head. “And I need you for something else.”

'For what?'

“If Zorro disappears at the same time as I, then the alcalde may draw the right conclusion that I'm Zorro. I don't know what he will do to my father or Victoria if he finds out and I'm no longer there to protect them.”

'What do you want me to do?'

“I want you to ride out on Toronado in Zorro's clothing, so that the soldiers will see you in the distance.”

'I can fight the soldiers, I'm better with the sword than any of them.' Felipe made some quick movements with an imaginary sword, demonstrating his skill.

Diego smiled. “I know you could beat any of them in a sword fight, but it takes more practice to beat them all at once and you're not ready for that yet. Promise me, you won't engage them in a fight or come close enough for them to notice the difference between us.” Felipe seemed a bit reluctant, but finally he nodded. 'I promise.'

Diego rose from the cold floor and extended his hand to Felipe, helping him up and hugging him. “I love you, son.”

Back in the library Diego went to the parlor in search for his father to talk to him.

Alejandro had just come home from the pueblo and was in a bad mood. “Ah, Diego, there you are. Last week there was an attack on a coach coming from Monterey and two passengers were killed and robbed. It took the lancers until today to find the culprits and bring them to justice when I would have taken Zorro only a day to achieve that feat. That can't go on. Zorro seemingly doesn't care anymore and the lancers are hopelessly incompetent. Tonight is a meeting of the caballeros at Don Emilio's hacienda and I want you to accompany me.”

“I think it's a good idea for the caballeros to take some action. They can't always rely on Zorro.” Diego agreed with his father.

“Then you will come with me to the meeting?” Alejandro looked at him expectantly.

“I'm sorry, Father, but I'm going to Mexico for some time and I have much to prepare.”

“You are going to Mexico, Diego? Do you think this is the right time?”

“Father, please,” Diego tried to interrupt his father, but there was no stopping him, once he got in rage.

“Don't you father me, Diego,” Alejandro wasn't in the mood to listen to his son. “You are needed here in Los Angeles. This is not the time to travel for whatever reason you have. Zorro hasn't come to the pueblo for weeks and it's time for you to take over some of the responsibility. Stop hiding behind your pointless experiments and finally do something. You need to come along to the meeting tonight.”

Diego had wanted to talk and in his shocked state he couldn't stand his father's accusations any more. “I told you before that I don't have the time and I'm sorry that you see me as a disappointment, but maybe you should take a final look at me. I am leaving tomorrow and I don't

know if I'll be back. Stop thinking that Zorro can solve all your problems for you. All you have done the recent years was to protest and hope that Zorro would save the day for you. And now that he is no longer doing his job as you name it, you blame it on him. It's time for the caballeros to stand up for their own and for the lancers to finally do their job to keep the area secure. For once start thinking before you act.”

Angry and frustrated Diego returned to the library where he quietly slipped into the cave. This wasn't the way he had imagined his last evening at home. He had wanted to tell his father everything, but instead it had ended in one of these arguments that they'd had so often in the recent years, with Alejandro showing his disappointment in his son all too clear. Diego wanted to be accepted as himself or the man he pretended to be while he was unable to reveal his secret.

If only his father would listen to him once. Frustrated Diego paced the cave stopping from time to time to look at one item or another on the shelves, deciding if he would need it in Mexico. He knew he should start packing now and prepare everything for his absence, but his feelings were too mixed up to find the patience for it.

There was one more thing he needed to do, the one thing he dreaded the most. He had to talk to Victoria before he left.

Chapter 2

Victoria had locked the front door and was cleaning up in the main room when Zorro slipped into the kitchen. From behind the curtains he watched her rearrange the tables and put dirty glasses on a tray. Occupied with the heavy load in her hands, she passed him by without noticing him and set the tray on the table next to the sink. Only when she turned around again, she became aware of his presence.

“Zorro, you startled me,” Victoria said, nearly dropping the dishes. “How long have you been standing there?”

“I just arrived,” he lied. He hadn't seen her recently, neither as Diego nor as Zorro, and he fought against his desire to take her in his arms, but he knew then he would never be able to do what he came for.

“Zorro, I have been missing you. Where have you been?” Victoria smiled, happy to see him. She was about to rush in his arms, but he backed up and folded his arms across his chest. Victoria stopped in mid movement, puzzled by his efforts to keep a distance between them.

“What is wrong? Why are you so different today?” Victoria said, alarmed.

“Victoria, I have to talk to you.” His voice was sincere and his face became grim. “I will leave the Los Angeles area and I don't know if I will come back. I have to tell you this because I don't want you to wait for me any longer.”

Victoria looked at him in shock. “You are taking back your proposal? Why? Don't you love anymore?”

“Victoria, please. I still love you. It is just as I said, I have to leave and I can't tell you if I will be back.” He tried not to show her his despair.

“Do you think you can leave me like this, Zorro? Don't you think you owe me an explanation, after all these years I have been waiting for you?” Victoria was angry now. Her voice was hovering between anger and tears. “In the recent weeks I haven't seen you at all and now you want to break our engagement! How can you expect me to believe you that you still love me?”

“Victoria,” he didn't know what to say. Aware that another spell could surprise him any time, he didn't trust his body anymore to climb up to the first floor as he used to, so he just headed for the stairs.

He was relieved that she didn't realize what was different tonight and that this was the first time he was using the stairs instead of directly climbing up to the window he used as his exit. But she didn't want him to leave so easily. Quickly she passed him by on the steps and turned around, her arms spread to the side barring the stairs. She was now on eye level with him and he had to pass by her to leave.

“Tell me why, Zorro, or have the heart to tell that you don't love me anymore.”

He stopped and stared at her for moment. Even with the mask she could see fighting emotions reflecting on his face. He tried to restrain himself, but he couldn't control his emotions anymore. Tucking his gloves in his belt, he drew her close to hold her and to feel her. Tenderly he brushed through her hair and caressed her cheek before he kissed her. “I love you, Victoria, more than you'll

ever know.” Knowing this was probably the last time he'd be holding her, he couldn't restrain himself anymore. He needed to feel her in his arms, to breathe her and to smell her scent. Kissing her like never before, he wouldn't let her release out of his arms. Showering her with kisses he locked her in an even tighter embrace than usual.

“Victoria, believe me, I wish I could stay, but I have to go,” he whispered, holding onto her as if she was his lifeline. When Victoria saw the tears glittering in his eyes, she knew that something was truly amiss.

Overwhelmed by the intensity of his emotions, Victoria felt his despair and wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him tight. “I'm here, Zorro,” she assured him. “Tell me what's wrong!” she demanded. “Tell me everything.”

After he had calmed down enough to release her again, she led him by the hand to one of the tables and made him sit down beside her.

Without any more objections he wrapped his hands around her waist and stared at her, searching for words. “I .. I ..,” he started, “I'm ill, Victoria, very ill.”

“What do you mean by that and why is that a reason to break our engagement? Don't you know that I'm here for you?”

“I may not have much more time to live.” His voice was quiet.

Victoria blanched at his words. “No,” she whispered. “That can't be. What ails you?”

“Do you remember Palomarez? When he returned, he claimed that I was a dead man?”

“Yes, but what has Palomarez to do with your illness?” Victoria asked uncomprehendingly. Zorro told her how he investigated the false deed at the de la Vega hacienda and how he was injured by him.

“He poisoned me and he told me I had only twenty-four hours to live, but by making him believe he was poisoned too, I tricked him into leading me to the antidote in time. After I drank the antidote, I felt alright again.”

“You survived and it was years ago,” Victoria asked. “Why does it cause you problems now?”

“Recently I had some spells when my hand started to shake and I could hardly grip the sword during a fight and there were other symptoms that were similar to what I suffered during that time.”

“Is that why you don't come to town any longer?”

He nodded. “I did some research and went to a doctor in San Pedro. During my visit today he confirmed what I had suspected. These shaking spells and some other effects are the lingering results of the poison. The same happened to some soldiers who were attacked with poisonous arrows by some Indians in the Amazonian jungle. Those who did survive got the same aftereffects some years later. Of the six soldiers, who survived the initial attack, five died six months after the aftereffects appeared three years later.”

Victoria was scared. “When did your spells start?”

“About two months ago.”

“Are you telling me you have only four more months to live? Is there nothing you can do? What happened to the sixth soldier?” Victoria stared at him in shock.

“The doctor in San Pedro has a colleague in Mexico City who happens to be the doctor who treated the surviving soldier. He managed to flush the poison out of him. The doctor recommended me to go to Mexico City immediately and start the cure with the other doctor.”

He looked Victoria in the eyes. His face was sad. “Do you understand now why I have to go? It is either that or I'll be dead in four months.”

Victoria started to cry. “No, please, you cannot die. Not after all we have been through. It's not fair.”

He laughed a bitter laugh. “You cannot expect life to be fair. Otherwise we would have been granted a different alcalde and there would have been no need for Zorro.”

“When will you leave?” Victoria had wrapped her arms around his neck and looked into his face.

“The coaches to Mexico leave only every two weeks and I have no more time to lose. I have to leave tomorrow at noon.” Zorro said remorsefully.

“Tomorrow?” Victoria gasped. “Then this is the last time I will see you? That can't be.”

“I'm sorry, Querida. That's how it is.” He stared at her, trying to imprint her image in his mind while his hands brushed tenderly through her hair. “I wish it would be different, but I have to leave now.”

“Stay!” she said desperately. “Don't go. Stay with me tonight. Don't leave like this.”

She caressed his face and kissed him passionately. He did no longer hold back when he gave her the most passionate kiss she had ever received. His hands roamed across her body, touching her passionately. She felt emotions stir inside her she never knew they existed. After a while they finally broke apart.

“I don't think, it's a good idea,” he said in a husky voice. “We can't do this as long as we are not married. I don't want you to fall in disgrace when I'm gone.” He tried to remove himself from her embrace, but Victoria didn't want to let him go. Desperately she clung even tighter to him. “Don't go, please don't leave me.”

Kissing her again, he whispered, “I don't want to go, but I can't stay. It's too late to ask you to marry me because it would only make you a widow!”

“I'd rather be your widow than having nothing at all.” Victoria said determined.

“Victoria, I can't ask that of you. There's only this night left and even that is running fast.”

“Then there's no more time to lose. I can't bear to see you go!”

“Are you sure? Do you want to marry me right now?” he asked her longingly.

“Marry? Now?” Victoria was stunned.

“Yes, we could wake Padre Benitez and ask him to marry us, unless you don't want to.” Zorro

looked at her expectantly.

“Marrying you is all I ever wanted, even if it is in the middle of the night. This night is all we may ever have and I don't want you to leave me now and waste the time that remains.” Then another thought came to her mind. “But doesn't it mean you have to reveal your identity to me?”

“My identity won't matter anymore when I'm gone.” With a shove he removed the mask from his head and Victoria stared at him.

“Diego? Oh no!” she cried out.

With a hurt face he stood up abruptly and turned away from her. “I always knew you could never love the man behind the mask. I think I'd better leave.” He started to put on his mask again, but Victoria stopped him.

“Diego, no, you get this wrong.” Victoria moved in front of him and with her arms around his waist she put her head on his chest. “I just can't bear it lose you too. Being without Zorro is horrible, but losing you at the same time is even worse. I had hoped you'd be there for me when Zorro was gone, but now....,” she cried again. “I can't say who is more dear to me Zorro or you. I only couldn't admit my feelings. I couldn't understand myself how I could love two different men, but now I see why. You are the same person. And I still want to marry you.” She managed a smile under her tears.

Diego listened intently to her words, dropping his hands that were holding his mask and slowly closed his arms around her. “You can love me even if I'm only plain studious Diego? You will marry me?” he asked, hopefully.

“Yes, everything I ever wanted was to marry the man behind the mask. I'll be ready as soon as I have my ring.” She gave him a tender kiss, before she went up to her room. When she returned a few minutes later, he had put on his mask again. He couldn't take the chance to be discovered while they went to the church.

“Your father, does he know?” Victoria asked, remembering how honored Alejandro had been to give her away in her father's stead when she had been about to marry before.

Zorro shook his his head. “No, he doesn't. I wanted to talk to him, but instead we had another fight.” He sounded miserable.

“Oh,” Victoria could only to well imagine how it had gone, after she had witnessed more than once the arguments between father and son. “I'm sorry, Diego. It must have been bad for you to hear these words from your father all these years without being able to say something and I haven't been better either, but now that I know...,” she pointed at his mask. “I understand now and I'm sorry for what I said to you. Forgive me?”

“There is nothing to forgive, Querida.” Zorro drew her in his arms again. “I'm sorry that I can't give you the big wedding I wanted you to have with my father leading you down the aisle.”

“I don't mind that as long as I have you standing beside me at the altar. But you'll have to fix that with your father before you leave.”

“I know,” he didn't sound very happy.

“This is tomorrow, Diego, tonight we're going to get married and forget about everything else. I'm

ready if you are.” Victoria managed to bring a smile back to his face when she held out her hand for him. Taking it, Zorro led her out of the tavern.

Keeping to the shadows, they stealthily crept to the church. Zorro silently opened the church door and beckoned her to enter.

“Wait here. I will get the padre.”

Victoria sat down in the front pail after she had put on her white mantilla that she had fetched from her room together with her ring. The white mantilla showed her status as an unmarried virgin and she would never wear it again, exchanging it for the black of a married woman.

She started to think about the unexpected events of the evening, but soon Zorro reappeared with the padre and one of the mission helpers in tow.

“Juan will act as our witness,” Zorro explained the presence of the helper.

Padre Benitez did not seem to be surprised when Zorro removed his mask for the wedding. He only smiled as if his suspicions were confirmed.

The ceremony was short, due to the late hour and the unusual circumstances. Both didn't wait with their yes. The kiss Diego gave her was short but passionate. They both couldn't stand lingering any longer. All they wanted was to get back to the tavern and let their passion run free.

Without any incident they managed to sneak to the tavern back door unseen by the lancers. After Victoria opened the door, Zorro picked her up in his arms and carried her across the threshold.

Without setting her down he closed the door silently behind him and carried her to her bedroom. When he lowered her down on the bed, he saw the tears in her eyes.

“Why are you crying, Victoria? Are you regretting our wedding?” Diego asked confused.

Victoria shook her head. “I'll never regret that, Diego. I'm crying because I'll lose you tomorrow. I love you so much!”

“That is tomorrow, Querida. We still have tonight and I'm going to hold you in my arms and love you until then.” He kissed her tears away tenderly, but kissed her passionately when he reached her mouth. Victoria responded eagerly. “Let's waste no more time,” she whispered while they helped each other to get rid of their clothes.

Z Z Z

Except for some naps neither of them got much sleep that night. This night was too precious to spend it on sleep. When they did not make love, they lay in each others arms, talking softly. Between sweet whispers of love Victoria asked the questions that were burning on her mind. She knew she might never get another chance to ask them.

It was before dawn when he rose. He had to leave while it was still dark and his black outfit hid him from the lancers.

After he had dressed he sat down at the edge of the bed looking at his sleeping wife. “Querida, I have to go now,” he whispered, gently brushing a curl from her face. “Don't go,” she murmured sleepily. She had fallen asleep despite her efforts to stay awake.

“I'd love to stay, but there are a lot of things I have to do before I leave. I wanted to do them last

night after saying goodbye to you.”

He didn't need to add that he had never planned to stay the night and that he had to put his things in order, in case he never came back.

“I'll come with you,” Victoria sat up in bed.

“I'd love to have you at my side, but you can hardly keep your eyes open and you can't help me with my preparations. After last night you need your sleep.” Diego smiled, looking at her curves that were barely concealed by the sheet.

“I'll manage,” Victoria fought to stay awake.

“Sleep, mi Querida. Last night was wonderful and more than I ever expected, but I have to go now. I'll see you at noon, before the coach leaves.” Holding her naked body in his arms, touching her bare skin made him more than tempted to stay, but he knew he couldn't. Instead it became a long kiss that still ended too soon and some whispered words of love while he held her tight. Tears were running down her face and she clung to him, not wanting him to go.

“I wish I could hold you forever, but I can't stop the time. I will try to be back. The memories of last night will help me to go on.” He kissed her once more tenderly, before he put on his gloves again and quietly slipped out of the room.

After he had left, she sank back into the covers where his smell still lingered. She buried her face in the pillow and cried until sleep overtook her.

Chapter 3

It was dawning when Diego emerged from the cave. Instead of retreating to his room to get some sleep, he went outside the hacienda and leaned against the wall. From this point in the garden he could watch the sun slowly rise over Los Angeles in the distance, giving the white washed adobe houses a golden shine. He thought of Victoria and his family and how hard it was to leave them.

“Diego, what are you doing here outside at this hour?” his father pulled him out of his thoughts.

Unnoticed from Diego, Alejandro, who was an early riser, had stepped outside the hacienda to find his son awake and crying at this early hour. “What's wrong, Diego?”

“Why father?” Diego wiped away the tears he hadn't been aware of.

“Don't tell me you're crying for nothing, son. I haven't seen you cry since you were a boy. So tell me what is going on? I'm sorry about our argument yesterday. I went looking for you last night to apologize, but I couldn't find you. You said you were going to Mexico today and didn't know if you would return. Can you tell me why? Is that because of our fights? Because you think I'm disappointed in you? Are you leaving me?” Alejandro's fear was obvious. “Will you stay if I apologize and promise to be a better father?”

Diego looked at his father intently. He knew he had to talk to him, before he left and set things right between them. He shook his head, “I can't stay, Father and there is nothing you can do to change it. I wish there was, but I can't stop the time. And there's not much left. No more time when we have wasted all those years.”

“Diego?” Alejandro put a hand on his arm and looked at him questioningly, trying to find out what was bothering him.

“I love you, Father,” Diego embraced him shortly. “There is something I must tell you, Father.” Diego said seriously, leading him to a nearby bench and indicated him to sit down beside him. Alarmed by the sound of Diego's voice, Alejandro did as he was bidden.

Diego moved with his hands through his hands, searching for the right words to start. “What I have to tell you won't be easy and you have every right to be angry with me for not telling you earlier, but I beg you to forgive me.”

Alejandro's concern grew with Diego's words. Whatever the problem was, it was serious. “You're my only son, Diego and I love you even if I don't show it sometimes. You can trust me with whatever problem you have. I'm here for you.” Alejandro put his hand on Diego's shoulder in reassurance.

“I'm dying, Father.” Diego said simply.

Alejandro looked as shocked as Victoria had the night before.

“How? Why?” Alejandro stuttered.

“There is no time to explain everything to you now, Father and I'm very sorry for that.” Diego looked at his father remorsefully and slowly continued. “I was poisoned three years ago and I thought that the antidote had cured me. But I learned yesterday from the doctor in San Pedro that I was wrong. It's one of the aftereffects of the poison that it comes back after this time. I told you

yesterday that I'm going to Mexico, but that's not all. The reason why I'm going is to visit a doctor there because if I don't, I'll be dead in four months. I was recommended to that doctor in Mexico city who might be able to help me.”

Diego started to rise, but the lack of sleep and everything he went through the last day took effect. A dizzying spell overcame him, one of the worst he had encountered so far and he had to sit back again, taking hold on the armrest. Alejandro steadied him and looked at him with concern.

“Four months? You'll be dead in four months? Is that why you have been staying in bed so often in the recent years? Why haven't you told me before? I'm your father, I want to help you.” Alejandro was hurt, but his son was more important now. This was not the time to quarrel. Diego was swaying heavily and searching for hold, he leaned onto his father.

“Is that an effect of the poison? These dizzying spells? They will kill you?” Diego only nodded, fighting the spell and Alejandro held him while he was swaying.

“There is much more that you don't know about me, Father. Please forgive me for keeping my secrets,” Diego continued once the spell was over.

“I'll forgive you anything, just tell me now, just as you have to forgive for not being a better father, one you could trust.” Alejandro felt helpless and slowly he began to grasp that he was about to lose his son to an illness he couldn't understand and that his son had kept from him. Who could have poisoned Diego and for what reason? And why had Diego never said a word? How long had this been going on?

“I talked to Victoria yesterday to say goodbye to her, but she didn't want to let me go, so we asked Padre Benitez to marry us. Victoria became my wife last night. So today is actually my wedding day.” Diego smiled at the memory and stifled a yawn, covering his mouth with his hand. “You have finally gotten a daughter-in-law.” Diego tried to make it easier for his father.

“You and Victoria? But she's in love with Zorro.” Alejandro couldn't understand the news.

“I am Zorro, Father. I couldn't leave her waiting for me not knowing if I would return.” Diego explained patiently.

“You are Zorro? And you married Victoria last night? And you are dying?” All that was too much for Alejandro to take in at once.

“As I said, Father, I'm sorry.” Diego rose slowly from the bench, steady again, now that the spell was over. “Excuse me please, but there are some more things I need to take care of, before I leave. It's not your fault, Father that I didn't tell you. It was all because of Zorro. I needed to protect you, so there is nobody to blame for.”

Alejandro watched him enter the hacienda, still frozen on his seat at the bench. The moment Diego vanished from sight, it was like pang overcame him. This might be the last time he saw his son enter the hacienda before he left and no one knew if he would return.

It just couldn't be, it had to be a nightmare. His son couldn't be Zorro or dying or married to Victoria. His son was just Diego who spent too much time with his studies. All he needed to do was to wake up now.

But he heard the noises from the hacienda, the servants getting up and starting with their work and

he knew he wasn't dreaming at all. Then he began to weep silently. Diego was dying! He was losing his only son. Oh Madre de Dios help him. Please, don't let him die, he begged, please, please not Diego.

Praying some more in his sudden despair, he stayed at the bench until he slowly came out of his stupor. Then he rose from the bench to follow his son inside and join him for breakfast.

They didn't talk much at breakfast, the shock from the news sitting too deep with his father. Diego had told him and Felipe what they needed to know and there wasn't much more to say. There wasn't the time to explain his father everything about Zorro and he tried to cheer them up by telling them that his chances to be cured were quite good though he couldn't convince them when he wasn't so sure himself.

Felipe hadn't slept last night either. He was older now than the last time he had lost his parents, but Diego had been his parent since, and the prospect of losing him made him feel as if he was six years old again. When he couldn't hold back his tears any more, he ran from the breakfast table into the cave to soothe himself by taking care of Toronado.

It was there where Diego found him later. There were some things he had to take care of before he left, like changing his will to include Victoria as his wife, to write some letters and arrange for his absence with Felipe, as far as it could be arranged on such a short notice. After he had packed what he would need in Mexico, he used the remaining time to take a walk around the hacienda and remember childhood memories and pleasant times he had spent here with his parents, Felipe and Victoria.

Then it was time to say goodbye. They had all tears in their eyes when they embraced. "I love you, Father."

"I love you too, son." Alejandro patted his son on the shoulder. "Come back Diego, please come back."

When the carriage started to move towards the pueblo, Diego turned around and waved again with his hands. His father and Felipe were still standing in front of the hacienda watching the carriage with Diego disappear.

Alejandro was leaning on Felipe when they returned inside. "I cannot replace Diego," Alejandro said to Felipe, "but I'll be here for you when you need me. Just as I was during the time Diego was in Madrid. And we must not lose faith that he will return."

Felipe nodded gratefully at Alejandro. "And now you can start telling me everything about Zorro. Diego wasn't very forthcoming about Zorro and how he came to his illness. But I'm sure you can tell me much more."

Felipe sighed at the prospect of the endless questions he would have to answer.