

## Excerpt – *The Eleventh Question*

Dianne Gray

Cayo tried to keep to the smooth lines forged by trucks and cattle to protect his feet from sharp stones. The sacks he carried were heavy and each step became a true test of his will. At the halfway point his feet were numb. He looked back to see he was leaving a bloody trail of footprints. Ahead he faced snow covered ground.

He wondered if any Ayudante in the past had given up their work with Diosa to help another person. He wondered if she had ever told them to leave because they were not fulfilling their role. Would he be the first to face her wrath by making a promise to a friend before speaking to her about its consequence? He knew she would not understand the reasoning behind his emotions. Fabien was like a brother to him. They had grown up together in a world where their lives were cheap and no one cared if they lived or died. Fate had been kind to him. He wondered what his life would have been like if Diosa hadn't chosen him. Would he be the one sleeping in the square at night and juggling and dancing for money in the day? Would people spit on him and rob him? Diosa had once told him that all people walk the same track, but it is destiny that determines the weight of the footprint.

In the semi-darkness he heard a noise like heavy breathing behind his shoulder. His first thought was that the old woman had followed him up the mountain. He quickly turned to see the long face, flaring nostrils, ragged hair and huge dark eyes of a woolly paramo donkey. He rubbed its nose with his cold hand. It bared its teeth at him in a grotesque smile.

'Where is your master?' he asked as he scanned the darkness.

The donkey brayed loudly into his face, the wind of its breath caught in Cayo's nostrils and the sound reverberated through his head. He turned to continue walking and the donkey nudged him in the back. With the weight of his sacks and tender feet, he stumbled and fell to the ground. He sat for a moment rubbing at his legs.

'And now I need to get up!' he yelled, 'I do not know if I can walk.'

The donkey brayed again, its tail flicking like a small whip on either side of its rump.

Cayo manoeuvred himself to his knees and gripped the donkey's ragged mane. With all his strength he managed to pull himself, and his goods, onto its back.

'I will make sure I return you to your rightful owner,' he said as the donkey made its way through the snow. 'And you will be fed well when we reach our destination.'

Occasionally, the donkey would take the wrong track but Cayo managed to pull at his mane and turn him in the right direction.

Upon reaching the cabin, he manoeuvred the donkey to the protection of the woodshed. He fell off, hitting his back on the hard ground. He reached into his sack and pulled out a loaf of bread. The donkey ground it through its teeth, lifted its head and swallowed it all.

His feet burned as he hobbled up the steps and into the kitchen. He placed the sacks of food on the bench and sat down in front of the fire.

'Why do you walk like a cripple?' Diosa asked without looking at him.

'My feet,' he said as he rubbed his bloody soles.

'What happened to your boots?'

'I met a friend, he had been robbed of his shoes...'

he began, but stopped as Diosa turned to face him.

‘You gave your friend your boots,’ she began, ‘and now you cannot walk?’

‘I will be alright,’ he said. But he knew he wasn’t alright. The warmth from the fire was bringing his feet back to life and he felt as if the blood vessels were exploding beneath his skin.

‘A long time ago,’ she recalled, ‘another of my Ayudante’s gave his shoes to a poor man and walked from the village in bare feet.’

Cayo was momentarily relieved that she understood.

‘That is good,’ he said.

‘Not good,’ she responded. ‘He lost his feet, then his legs, then his life.’

Cayo’s blood ran cold. He looked back at his feet. His cuts were filled with dirt and his toes blue with frost-bite.

‘I will clean them, immediately,’ he said as he tried to stand up.

‘I will get the bucket,’ she said.

He watched as she looked through her metal jars on the shelf. A mixture of herbs, bark, dried leaves and bones went into a bucket of soapy water. He placed his feet in the mixture. The pain sent a shockwave through his body and out his mouth in a bloodcurdling scream. He gripped his hands onto his knees and held tightly to control the torture that could only be matched by burning in hell itself.

‘When you can,’ she said, ‘rub the soles of your feet across the bones at the bottom of the bucket.’

He nodded and tried to breathe, but the pain crushed the air from his lungs.

‘Tell me about the man who was robbed of his shoes.’

He tried to speak, for several moments he gasped air like a fish in the dust.

‘He is my friend, Fabien,’ he began. ‘He was with me that day you chose me at the bottom of the mountain. He is like a brother to me. I promised him I

would go back tomorrow and talk to the priest about finding a place for him to live.'

'You made a promise?' she questioned. 'This is a dangerous thing. Never promise in the midst of sorrow or sympathy. A promise is like a cloud – the fulfilment is rain. You will not be able to go back to the village until you can walk. Your promise has already brought drought.'

'I will walk,' he whispered. 'Or I will take your sign.'

'My sign?' Diosa looked perplexed.

'Half way up the hill,' he said, 'a donkey came to me. I was able to climb onto his back. This was clearly a sign.'

'I sent you no sign,' she said.

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