

“Fear of knowledge is natural; all of us experience it, and there is nothing we can do about it. But no matter how frightening learning is, it is more terrible to think of a man without knowledge.”

—don Juan Matus

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**CARLOS
CASTANEDA**

**THE SECOND
RING
OF POWER**



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Preface

A flat, barren mountaintop on the western slopes of the Sierra Madre in central Mexico was the setting for my final meeting with don Juan and don Genaro and their other two apprentices, Pablito and Nestor. The solemnity and the scope of what took place there left no doubt in my mind that our apprenticeships had come to their concluding moment, and that I was indeed seeing don Juan and don Genaro for the last time. Toward the end we all said good-bye to one another, and then Pablito and I jumped together from the top of the mountain into an abyss.

Prior to that jump don Juan had presented a fundamental principle for all that was going to happen to me. According to him, upon jumping into the abyss I was going to become pure perception and move back and forth between the two inherent realms of all creation, the tonal and the nagual.

In my jump my perception went through seventeen elastic bounces between the tonal and the nagual. In my moves into the nagual I perceived my body disintegrating. I could not think or feel in the coherent, unifying sense that I ordinarily do, but I somehow thought and felt. In my moves into the tonal I burst into unity. I was whole. My perception had coherence. I had visions of order. Their compelling force

was so intense, their vividness so real and their complexity so vast that I have not been capable of explaining them to my satisfaction. To say that they were visions, vivid dreams or even hallucinations does not say anything to clarify their nature.

After having examined and analyzed in a most thorough and careful manner my feelings, perceptions and interpretations of that jump into the abyss, I had come to the point where I could not rationally believe that it had actually happened. And yet another part of me held on steadfast to the feeling that it did happen, that I did jump.

Don Juan and don Genaro are no longer available and their absence has created in me a most pressing need, the need to make headway in the midst of apparently insoluble contradictions.

I went back to Mexico to see Pablito and Nestor to seek their help in resolving my conflicts. But what I encountered on my trip cannot be described in any other way except as a final assault on my reason, a concentrated attack designed by don Juan himself. His apprentices, under his absentee direction, in a most methodical and precise fashion demolished in a few days the last bastion of my reason. In those few days they revealed to me one of the two practical aspects of their sorcery, the art of dreaming, which is the core of the present work.

The art of stalking, the other practical aspect of their sorcery and also the crowning stone of don Juan's and don Genaro's teachings, was presented to me during subsequent visits and was by far the most complex facet of their being in the world as sorcerers.

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The Transformation of Doña Soledad

I had a sudden premonition that Pablito and Nestor were not home. My certainty was so profound that I stopped my car. I was at the place where the asphalt came to an abrupt end, and I wanted to reconsider whether or not to continue that day the long and difficult drive on the steep, coarse gravel road to their hometown in the mountains of central Mexico.

I rolled down the window of my car. It was rather windy and cold. I got out to stretch my legs. The tension of driving for hours had stiffened my back and neck. I walked to the edge of the paved road. The ground was wet from an early shower. Rain was still falling heavily on the slopes of the mountains to the south, a short distance from where I was. But right in front of me, toward the east and also toward the north, the sky was clear. At certain points on the winding road I had been able to see the bluish peaks of the sierras shining in the sunlight a great distance away.

After a moment's deliberation I decided to turn back and go to the city because I had had a most peculiar feeling that I was going to find don Juan in the market. After all, I had always done just that, found him in the marketplace, since the beginning of

my association with him. As a rule, if I did not find him in Sonora I would drive to central Mexico and go to the market of that particular city, and sooner or later don Juan would show up. The longest I had ever waited for him was two days. I was so habituated to meeting him in that manner that I had the most absolute certainty that I would find him again, as always.

I waited in the market all afternoon. I walked up and down the aisles pretending to be looking for something to buy. Then I waited around the park. At dusk I knew that he was not coming. I had then the clear sensation that he had been there but had left. I sat down on a park bench where I used to sit with him and tried to analyze my feelings. Upon arriving in the city I was elated with the sure knowledge that don Juan was there in the streets. What I felt was more than the memory of having found him there countless times before; my body knew that he was looking for me. But then, as I sat on the bench I had another kind of strange certainty. I knew that he was not there anymore. He had left and I had missed him.

After a while I discarded my speculations. I thought that I was beginning to be affected by the place. I was starting to get irrational; that had always happened to me in the past after a few days in that area.

I went to my hotel room to rest for a few hours and then I went out again to roam the streets. I did not have the same expectation of finding don Juan that I had had in the afternoon. I gave up. I went back to my hotel in order to get a good night's sleep.

Before I headed for the mountains in the morning, I drove up and down the main streets in my car, but somehow I knew that I was wasting my time. Don Juan was not there.

It took me all morning to drive to the little town where Pablito and Nestor lived. I arrived around noon. Don Juan had taught me never to drive directly

into the town so as not to arouse the curiosity of on-lookers. Every time I had been there I had always driven off the road, just before reaching the town, onto a flat field where youngsters usually played soccer. The dirt was well packed all the way to a walking trail which was wide enough for a car and which passed by Pablito's and Nestor's houses in the foothills south of town. As soon as I got to the edge of the field I found that the walking trail had been turned into a gravel road.

I deliberated whether to go to Nestor's house or Pablito's. The feeling that they were not there still persisted. I opted to go to Pablito's; I reasoned that Nestor lived alone, while Pablito lived with his mother and his four sisters. If he was not there the women could help me find him. As I got closer to his house I noticed that the path leading from the road up to the house had been widened. It looked as if the ground was hard, and since there was enough space for my car, I drove almost to the front door. A new porch with a tile roof had been added to the adobe house. There were no dogs barking but I saw an enormous one sitting calmly behind a fenced area, alertly observing me. A flock of chickens that had been feeding in front of the house scattered around, cackling. I turned the motor off and stretched my arms over my head. My body was stiff.

The house seemed deserted. The thought crossed my mind that perhaps Pablito and his family had moved away and someone else was living there. Suddenly the front door opened with a bang and Pablito's mother stepped out as if someone had pushed her. She stared at me absentmindedly for an instant. As I got out of my car she seemed to recognize me. A graceful shiver ran through her body and she ran toward me. I thought that she must have been napping and that the noise of the car had woken her, and when she

came out to see what was going on she did not know at first who I was. The incongruous sight of the old woman running toward me made me smile. When she got closer I had a moment of doubt. Somehow she moved so nimbly that she did not seem like Pablito's mother at all.

"My goodness what a surprise!" she exclaimed.

"Doña Soledad?" I asked, incredulously.

"Don't you recognize me?" she replied, laughing.

I made some stupid comments about her surprising agility.

"Why do you always see me as a helpless old woman?" she asked, looking at me with an air of mock challenge.

She bluntly accused me of having nicknamed her "Mrs. Pyramid." I remembered that I had once said to Nestor that her shape reminded me of a pyramid. She had a very broad and massive behind and a small pointed head. The long dresses that she usually wore added to the effect.

"Look at me," she said. "Do I still look like a pyramid?"

She was smiling but her eyes made me feel uncomfortable. I attempted to defend myself by making a joke but she cut me off and coaxed me to admit that I was responsible for the nickname. I assured her that I had never intended it as such and that anyway, at that moment she was so lean that her shape was the furthest thing from a pyramid.

"What's happened to you, doña Soledad?" I asked. "You're transformed."

"You said it," she replied briskly. "I've been transformed!"

I meant it figuratively. However, upon closer examination I had to admit that there was no room for a metaphor. She was truly a changed person. I sud-

denly had a dry, metallic taste in my mouth. I was afraid.

She placed her fists on her hips and stood with her legs slightly apart, facing me. She was wearing a light green, gathered skirt and a whitish blouse. Her skirt was shorter than those she used to wear. I could not see her hair; she had it tied with a thick band, a turban-like piece of cloth. She was barefoot and she rhythmically tapped her big feet on the ground as she smiled with the candor of a young girl. I had never seen anyone exude as much strength as she did. I noticed a strange gleam in her eyes, a disturbing gleam but not a frightening one. I thought that perhaps I had never really examined her appearance carefully. Among other things I felt guilty for having glossed over many people during my years with don Juan. The force of his personality had rendered everyone else pale and unimportant.

I told her that I had never imagined that she could have such a stupendous vitality, that my carelessness was to blame for not really knowing her, and that no doubt I would have to meet everyone else all over again.

She came closer to me. She smiled and put her right hand on the back of my left arm, grabbing it gently.

“That’s for sure,” she whispered in my ear.

Her smile froze and her eyes became glazed. She was so close to me that I felt her breasts rubbing my left shoulder. My discomfort increased as I tried to convince myself that there was no reason for alarm. I repeated to myself over and over that I really had never known Pablito’s mother, and that in spite of her odd behavior she was probably being her normal self. But some frightened part of me knew that those were only bracing thoughts with no substance at all, because no matter how much I may have glossed over

her person, not only did I remember her very well but I had known her very well. She represented to me the archetype of a mother; I thought her to be in her late fifties or even older. Her weak muscles moved her bulky weight with extreme difficulty. Her hair had a lot of gray in it. She was, as I remembered her, a sad, somber woman with kind, handsome features, a dedicated, suffering mother, always in the kitchen, always tired. I also remembered her to be a very gentle and unselfish woman, and a very timid one, timid to the point of being thoroughly subservient to anyone who happened to be around. That was the picture I had of her, reinforced throughout years of casual contact. That day something was terribly different. The woman I was confronting did not at all fit the image I had of Pablito's mother, and yet she was the same person, leaner and stronger, looking twenty years younger, than the last time I had seen her. I felt a shiver in my body.

She moved a couple of steps in front of me and faced me.

"Let me look at you," she said. "The Nagual told us that you're a devil."

I remembered then that all of them, Pablito, his mother, his sisters and Nestor, had always seemed unwilling to voice don Juan's name and called him "the Nagual," a usage which I myself adopted when talking with them.

She daringly put her hands on my shoulders, something she had never done before. My body tensed. I really did not know what to say. There was a long pause that allowed me to take stock of myself. Her appearance and behavior had frightened me to the point that I had forgotten to ask about Pablito and Nestor.

"Tell me, where is Pablito?" I asked her with a sudden wave of apprehension.

“Oh, he’s gone to the mountains,” she responded in a noncommittal tone and moved away from me.

“And where is Nestor?”

She rolled her eyes as if to show her indifference.

“They are together in the mountains,” she said in the same tone.

I felt genuinely relieved and told her that I had known without the shadow of a doubt that they were all right.

She glanced at me and smiled. A wave of happiness and ebullience came upon me and I embraced her. She boldly returned the embrace and held me; that act was so outlandish that it took my breath away. Her body was rigid. I sensed an extraordinary strength in her. My heart began to pound. I gently tried to push her away as I asked her if Nestor was still seeing don Genaro and don Juan. During our farewell meeting don Juan had expressed doubts that Nestor was ready to finish his apprenticeship.

“Genaro has left forever,” she said letting go of me.

She fretted nervously with the edge of her blouse.

“How about don Juan?”

“The Nagual is gone too,” she said, puckering her lips.

“Where did they go?”

“You mean you don’t know?”

I told her that both of them had said good-bye to me two years before, and that all I knew was that they were leaving at that time. I had not really dared to speculate where they had gone. They had never told me their whereabouts in the past, and I had come to accept the fact that if they wanted to disappear from my life all they had to do was to refuse to see me.

“They’re not around, that’s for sure,” she said, frowning, “And they won’t be coming back, that’s also for sure.”

Her voice was extremely unemotional. I began to feel annoyed with her. I wanted to leave.

“But you’re here,” she said, changing her frown into a smile. “You must wait for Pablito and Nestor. They’ve been dying to see you.”

She held my arm firmly and pulled me away from my car. Compared to the way she had been in the past, her boldness was astounding.

“But first, let me show you my friend,” she said and forcibly led me to the side of the house.

There was a fenced area, like a small corral. A huge male dog was there. The first thing that attracted my attention was his healthy, lustrous, yellowish-brown fur. He did not seem to be a mean dog. He was not chained and the fence was not high enough to hold him. The dog remained impassive as we got closer to him, not even wagging his tail. Doña Soledad pointed to a good-sized cage in the back. A coyote was curled up inside.

“That’s my friend,” she said. “The dog is not. He belongs to my girls.”

The dog looked at me and yawned. I liked him. I had a nonsensical feeling of kinship with him.

“Come, let’s go into the house,” she said, pulling me by the arm.

I hesitated. Some part of me was utterly alarmed and wanted to get out of there quickly, and yet another part of me would not have left for the world.

“You’re not afraid of me, are you?” she asked in an accusing tone.

“I most certainly am!” I exclaimed.

She giggled, and in a most comforting tone she declared that she was a clumsy, primitive woman who was very awkward with words, and that she hardly knew how to treat people. She looked straight into my eyes and said that don Juan had commissioned her to help me, because he worried about me.

“He told us that you’re not serious and go around causing a lot of trouble to innocent people,” she said.

Up to that point her assertions had been coherent to me, but I could not conceive don Juan saying those things about me.

We went inside the house. I wanted to sit down on the bench, where Pablito and I usually sat. She stopped me.

“This is not the place for you and me,” she said. “Let’s go to my room.”

“I’d rather sit here,” I said firmly. “I know this spot and I feel comfortable on it.”

She clicked her lips in disapproval. She acted like a disappointed child. She contracted her upper lip until it looked like the flat beak of a duck.

“There is something terribly wrong here,” I said. “I think I am going to leave if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

She became very flustered and argued that her trouble was not knowing how to talk to me. I confronted her with her unmistakable transformation and demanded that she tell me what had happened. I had to know how such a change had come about.

“If I tell you, will you stay?” she asked in a child’s voice.

“I’ll have to.”

“In that case I’ll tell you everything. But it has to be in my room.”

I had a moment of panic. I made a supreme effort to calm myself and we walked into her room. She lived in the back, where Pablito had built a bedroom for her. I had once been in the room while it was being built and also after it was finished, just before she moved in. The room looked as empty as I had seen it before, except that there was a bed in the very center of it and two unobtrusive chests of drawers by the door. The whitewash of the walls had faded into a

very soothing yellowish white. The wood of the ceiling had also weathered. Looking at the smooth, clean walls I had the impression they were scrubbed daily with a sponge. The room looked more like a monastic cell, very frugal and ascetic. There were no ornaments of any sort. The windows had thick, removable wood panels reinforced with an iron bar. There were no chairs or anything to sit on.

Doña Soledad took my writing pad away from me, held it to her bosom and then sat down on her bed, which was made up of two thick mattresses with no box springs. She indicated that I should sit down next to her.

“You and I are the same,” she said as she handed me my notebook.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You and I are the same,” she repeated without looking at me.

I could not figure out what she meant. She stared at me, as if waiting for a response.

“Just what is that supposed to mean, doña Soledad?” I asked.

My question seemed to baffle her. Obviously she expected me to know what she meant. She laughed at first, but then, when I insisted that I did not understand, she got angry. She sat up straight and accused me of being dishonest with her. Her eyes flared with rage; her mouth contracted in a very ugly gesture of wrath that made her look extremely old.

I honestly was at a loss and felt that no matter what I said it would be wrong. She also seemed to be in the same predicament. Her mouth moved to say something but her lips only quivered. At last she muttered that it was not impeccable to act the way I did at such a serious moment. She turned her back to me.

“Look at me, doña Soledad!” I said forcefully.

“I’m not mystifying you in any sense. You must know something that I know nothing about.”

“You talk too much,” she snapped angrily. “The Nagual told me never to let you talk. You twist everything.”

She jumped to her feet and stomped on the floor, like a spoiled child. I became aware at that moment that the room had a different floor. I remembered it to be a dirt floor, made from the dark soil of the area. The new floor was reddish pink. I momentarily put off a confrontation with her and walked around the room. I could not imagine how I could have missed noticing the floor when I first entered. It was magnificent. At first I thought that it was red clay that had been laid like cement, when it was soft and moist, but then I saw that there were no cracks in it. Clay would have dried, curled up, cracked, and clumps would have formed. I bent down and gently ran my fingers over it. It was hard as bricks. The clay had been fired. I became aware then that the floor was made of very large flat slabs of clay put together over a bed of soft clay that served as a matrix. The slabs made a most intricate and fascinating design, but a thoroughly unobtrusive one, unless one paid deliberate attention to it. The skill with which the slabs had been placed in position indicated to me a very well-conceived plan. I wanted to know how such big slabs had been fired without being warped. I turned around to ask doña Soledad. I quickly desisted. She would not have known what I was talking about. I paced over the floor again. The clay was a bit rough, almost like sandstone. It made a perfect slide-proof surface.

“Did Pablito put down this floor?” I asked.

She did not answer.

“It’s a superb piece of work,” I said. “You should be very proud of him.”

I had no doubt that Pablito had done it. No one else could have had the imagination and the capacity to conceive of it. I figured that he must have made it during the time I had been away. But on second thought I realized that I had never entered doña Soledad's room since it had been built, six or seven years before.

"Pablito! Pablito! Bah!" she exclaimed in an angry, raspy voice. "What makes you think he's the only one who can make things?"

We exchanged a long, sustained look, and all of a sudden I knew that it was she who had made the floor, and that don Juan had put her up to it.

We stood quietly, looking at each other for some time. I felt it would have been thoroughly superfluous to ask if I was correct.

"I made it myself," she finally said in a dry tone. "The Nagual told me how."

Her statements made me feel euphoric. I practically lifted her up in an embrace. I twirled her around. All I could think to do was to bombard her with questions. I wanted to know how she had made the slabs, what the designs represented, where she got the clay. But she did not share my exhilaration. She remained quiet and impassive, looking at me askance from time to time.

I paced on the floor again. The bed had been placed at the very epicenter of some converging lines. The clay slabs had been cut in sharp angles to create converging motifs that seemed to radiate out from under the bed.

"I have no words to tell you how impressed I am," I said.

"Words! Who needs words?" she said cuttingly.

I had a flash of insight. My reason had been betraying me. There was only one possible way of explaining

her magnificent metamorphosis; don Juan must have made her his apprentice. How else could an old woman like doña Soledad turn into such a weird, powerful being? That should have been obvious to me from the moment I laid eyes on her, but my set of expectations about her had not included that possibility.

I deduced that whatever don Juan had done to her must have taken place during the two years I had not seen her, although two years seemed hardly any time at all for such a superb alteration.

“I think I know now what happened to you,” I said in a casual and cheerful tone. “Something has cleared up in my mind right now.”

“Oh, is that so?” she said, thoroughly uninterested.

“The Nagual is teaching you to be a sorceress, isn’t that true?”

She glared at me defiantly. I felt that I had said the worst possible thing. There was an expression of true contempt on her face. She was not going to tell me anything.

“What a bastard you are!” she exclaimed suddenly, shaking with rage.

I thought that her anger was unjustified. I sat down on one end of the bed while she nervously tapped on the floor with her heel. Then she sat down on the other end, without looking at me.

“What exactly do you want me to do?” I asked in a firm and intimidating tone.

“I told you already!” she said in a yell. “You and I are the same.”

I asked her to explain her meaning and not to assume for one instant that I knew anything. Those statements angered her even more. She stood up abruptly and dropped her skirt to the ground.

“This is what I mean!” she yelled, caressing her pubic area.

My mouth opened involuntarily. I became aware that I was staring at her like an idiot.

“You and I are one here!” she said.

I was dumbfounded. Doña Soledad, the old Indian woman, mother of my friend Pablito, was actually half-naked a few feet away from me, showing me her genitals. I stared at her, incapable of formulating any thoughts. The only thing I knew was that her body was not the body of an old woman. She had beautifully muscular thighs, dark and hairless. The bone structure of her hips was broad, but there was no fat on them.

She must have noticed my scrutiny and flung herself on the bed.

“You know what to do,” she said, pointing to her pubis. “We are one here.”

She uncovered her robust breasts.

“Doña Soledad, I implore you!” I exclaimed. “What’s come over you? You’re Pablito’s mother.”

“No, I’m not!” she snapped. “I’m no one’s mother.”

She sat up and looked at me with fierce eyes.

“I am just like you, a piece of the Nagual,” she said. “We’re made to mix.”

She opened her legs and I jumped away.

“Wait a minute, doña Soledad,” I said. “Let’s talk for a while.”

I had a moment of wild fear, and a sudden crazy thought occurred to me. Would it be possible, I asked myself, that don Juan was hiding somewhere around there laughing his head off?

“Don Juan!” I bellowed.

My yell was so loud and profound that doña Soledad jumped off her bed and covered herself hurriedly with her skirt. I saw her putting it on as I bellowed again.

“Don Juan!”

I ran through the house bellowing don Juan’s name until my throat was sore. Doña Soledad, in the mean-

time, had run outside the house and was standing by my car, looking puzzled at me.

I walked over to her and asked her if don Juan had told her to do all that. She nodded affirmatively. I asked if he was around. She said no.

“Tell me everything,” I said.

She told me that she was merely following don Juan’s orders. He had commanded her to change her being into a warrior’s in order to help me. She declared that she had been waiting for years to fulfill that promise.

“I’m very strong now,” she said softly. “Just for you. But you disliked me in my room, didn’t you?”

I found myself explaining that I did not dislike her, that what counted were my feelings for Pablito; then I realized that I did not have the vaguest idea of what I was saying.

Doña Soledad seemed to understand my embarrassing position and said that our mishap had to be forgotten.

“You must be famished,” she said vivaciously. “I’ll make you some food.”

“There’s a lot that you haven’t explained to me,” I said. “I’ll be frank with you, I wouldn’t stay here for anything in the world. You frighten me.”

“You are obligated to accept my hospitality, if it is only for a cup of coffee,” she said unruffled. “Come, let’s forget what happened.”

She made a gesture of going into the house. At that moment I heard a deep growl. The dog was standing, looking at us, as if he understood what was being said.

Doña Soledad fixed a most frightening gaze on me. Then she softened it and smiled.

“Don’t let my eyes bother you,” she said. “The truth is that I am old. Lately I’ve been getting dizzy. I think I need glasses.”

She broke into a laugh and clowned, looking through cupped fingers as if they were glasses.

“An old Indian woman with glasses! That’ll be a laugh,” she said giggling.

I made up my mind then to be rude and get out of there, without any explanation. But before I drove away I wanted to leave some things for Pablito and his sisters. I opened the trunk of the car to get the gifts I had brought for them. I leaned way into it to reach first for the two packages that were lodged against the wall of the back seat, behind the spare tire. I got hold of one and was about to grab the other when I felt a soft, furry hand on the nape of my neck. I shrieked involuntarily and hit my head on the open lid. I turned to look. The pressure of the furry hand did not let me turn completely, but I was able to catch a fleeting glimpse of a silvery arm or paw hovering over my neck. I wriggled in panic and pushed myself away from the trunk and fell down on my seat with the package still in my hand. My whole body shook, the muscles of my legs contracted and I found myself leaping up and running away.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” doña Soledad said apologetically, as I watched her from ten feet away.

She showed me the palms of her hands in a gesture of surrender, as if assuring me that what I had felt was not her hand.

“What did you do to me?” I asked, trying to sound calm and detached.

She seemed to be either thoroughly embarrassed or baffled. She muttered something and shook her head as though she could not say it, or did not know what I was talking about.

“Come on, doña Soledad,” I said, coming closer to her, “don’t play tricks on me.”

She seemed about to weep. I wanted to comfort her,

but some part of me resisted. After a moment's pause I told her what I had felt and seen.

"That's just terrible!" She said in a shrieking voice.

In a very childlike gesture she covered her face with her right forearm. I thought she was crying. I came over to her and tried to put my arm around her shoulders. I could not bring myself to do it.

"Come now, doña Soledad," I said, "let's forget all this and let me give you these packages before I leave."

I stepped in front of her to face her. I could see her black, shining eyes and part of her face behind her arm. She was not crying. She was smiling.

I jumped back. Her smile terrified me. Both of us stood motionless for a long time. She kept her face covered but I could see her eyes watching me.

As I stood there almost paralyzed with fear I felt utterly despondent. I had fallen into a bottomless pit. Doña Soledad was a witch. My body knew it, and yet I could not really believe it. What I wanted to believe was that doña Soledad had gone mad and was being kept in the house instead of an asylum.

I did not dare move or take my eyes away from her. We must have stayed in that position for five or six minutes. She had kept her arm raised and yet motionless. She was standing at the rear of the car, almost leaning against the left fender. The lid of the trunk was still open. I thought of making a dash for the right door. The keys were in the ignition.

I relaxed a bit in order to gain the momentum to run. She seemed to notice my change of position immediately. Her arm moved down, revealing her whole face. Her teeth were clenched. Her eyes were fixed on mine. They looked hard and mean. Suddenly she lurched toward me. She stomped with her right foot, like a fencer, and reached out with clawed hands to

grab me by my waist as she let out the most chilling shriek.

My body jumped back out of her reach. I ran for the car, but with inconceivable agility she rolled to my feet and made me trip over her. I fell facedown and she grabbed me by the left foot. I contracted my right leg, and I would have kicked her in the face with the sole of my shoe had she not let go of me and rolled back. I jumped to my feet and tried to open the door of the car. It was locked. I threw myself over the hood to reach the other side but somehow doña Soledad got there before I did. I tried to roll back over the hood, but midway I felt a sharp pain in my right calf. She had grabbed me by the leg. I could not kick her with my left foot; she had pinned down both of my legs against the hood. She pulled me toward her and I fell on top of her. We wrestled on the ground. Her strength was magnificent and her shrieks were terrifying. I could hardly move under the gigantic pressure of her body. It was not a matter of weight but rather tension, and she had it. Suddenly I heard a growl and the enormous dog jumped on her back and shoved her away from me. I stood up. I wanted to get into the car, but the woman and the dog were fighting by the door. The only retreat was to go inside the house. I made it in one or two seconds. I did not turn to look at them but rushed inside and closed the door behind me, securing it with the iron bar that was behind it. I ran to the back and did the same with the other door.

From inside I could hear the furious growling of the dog and the woman's inhuman shrieks. Then suddenly the dog's barking and growling turned into whining and howling as if he were in pain, or as if something were frightening him. I felt a jolt in the pit of my stomach. My ears began to buzz. I realized that I was trapped inside the house. I had a fit of sheer terror. I was revolted at my stupidity in running into the house.

The woman's attack had confused me so intensely that I had lost all sense of strategy and had behaved as if I were running away from an ordinary opponent who could be shut out by simply closing a door. I heard someone come to the door and lean against it, trying to force it open. Then there were loud knocks and banging on it.

"Open the door," doña Soledad said in a hard voice. "That goddamned dog has mauled me."

I deliberated whether or not to let her in. What came to my mind was the memory of a confrontation I had had years before with a sorceress, who had, according to don Juan, adopted his shape in order to fool me and deliver a deadly blow. Obviously doña Soledad was not as I had known her, but I had reasons to doubt that she was a sorceress. The time element played a decisive role in my conviction. Pablito, Nestor and I had been involved with don Juan and don Genaro for years and we were not sorcerers at all; how could doña Soledad be one? No matter how much she had changed she could not improvise something that would take a lifetime to accomplish.

"Why did you attack me?" I asked, speaking loudly so as to be heard through the thick door.

She answered that the Nagual had told her not to let me go. I asked her why.

She did not answer; instead she banged on the door furiously and I banged back even harder. We went on hitting the door for a few minutes. She stopped and started begging me to open it. I had a surge of nervous energy. I knew that if I opened the door I might have a chance to flee. I moved the iron bar from the door. She staggered in. Her blouse was torn. The band that held her hair had fallen off and her long hair was all over her face.

"Look what that son of a bitch dog did to me!" she yelled. "Look! Look!"

I took a deep breath. She seemed to be somewhat dazed. She sat down on a bench and began to take off her tattered blouse. I seized that moment to run out of the house and make a dash for the car. With a speed that was born only out of fear, I got inside, shut the door, automatically turned on the motor and put the car in reverse. I stepped on the gas and turned my head to look back through the rear window. As I turned I felt a hot breath on my face; I heard a horrendous growl and saw in a flash the demoniacal eyes of the dog. He was standing on the back seat. I saw his horrible teeth almost in my eyes. I ducked my head. His teeth grabbed my hair. I must have curled my whole body on the seat, and in doing so I let my foot off the clutch. The jerk of the car made the beast lose his balance. I opened the door and scrambled out. The head of the dog jutted out through the door. I heard his enormous teeth click as his jaws closed tight, missing my heels by a few inches. The car began to roll back and I made another dash for the house. I stopped before I had reached the door.

Doña Soledad was standing there. She had tied her hair up again. She had thrown a shawl over her shoulders. She stared at me for a moment and then began to laugh, very softly at first as if her wounds hurt her, and then loudly. She pointed a finger at me and held her stomach as she convulsed with laughter. She bent over and stretched, seemingly to catch her breath. She was naked above the waist. I could see her breasts, shaking with the convulsions of her laughter.

I felt that all was lost. I looked back toward the car. It had come to a stop after rolling four or five feet; the door had closed again, sealing the dog inside. I could see and hear the enormous beast biting the back of the front seat and pawing the windows.

A most peculiar decision faced me at that moment.

I did not know who scared me the most, doña Soledad or the dog. After a moment's thought I decided that the dog was just a stupid beast.

I ran back to the car and climbed up on the roof. The noise enraged the dog. I heard him ripping the upholstery. Lying on the roof I managed to open the driver's door. My idea was to open both doors and then slide from the roof into the car, through one of them, after the dog had gone out the other one. I leaned over to open the right door. I had forgotten that it was locked. At that moment the dog's head came out through the opened door. I had an attack of blind panic at the idea that the dog was going to jump out of the car and onto the roof.

In less than a second I had leaped to the ground and found myself standing at the door of the house.

Doña Soledad was bracing herself in the doorway. Laughter came out of her in spurts that seemed almost painful.

The dog had remained inside the car, still frothing with rage. Apparently he was too large and could not squeeze his bulky frame over the front seat. I went to the car and gently closed the door again. I began to look for a stick long enough to release the safety lock on the right-hand door.

I searched in the area in front of the house. There was not a single piece of wood lying around. Doña Soledad, in the meantime, had gone inside. I assessed my situation. I had no other alternative but to ask her help. With great trepidation, I crossed the threshold, looking in every direction in case she might have been hiding behind the door, waiting for me.

"Doña Soledad!" I yelled out.

"What the hell do you want?" she yelled back from her room.

"Would you please go out and get your dog out of my car?" I said.

“Are you kidding?” she replied. “That’s not my dog. I’ve told you already, he belongs to my girls.”

“Where are your girls?” I asked.

“They are in the mountains,” she replied.

She came out of her room and faced me.

“Do you want to see what that goddamned dog did to me?” she asked in a dry tone. “Look!”

She unwrapped her shawl and showed me her naked back.

I found no visible tooth marks on her back; there were only a few long, superficial scratches she might have gotten by rubbing against the hard ground. For all that matter, she could have scratched herself when she attacked me.

“You have nothing there,” I said.

“Come and look in the light,” she said and went over by the door.

She insisted that I look carefully for the gashes of the dog’s teeth. I felt stupid. I had a heavy sensation around my eyes, especially on my brow. I went outside instead. The dog had not moved and began to bark as soon as I came out the door.

I cursed myself. There was no one to blame but me. I had walked into that trap like a fool. I resolved right then to walk to town. But my wallet, my papers, everything I had was in my briefcase on the floor of the car, right under the dog’s feet. I had an attack of despair. It was useless to walk to town. I did not have enough money in my pockets even to buy a cup of coffee. Besides, I did not know a soul in town. I had no other alternative but to get the dog out of the car.

“What kind of food does that dog eat?” I yelled from the door.

“Why don’t you try your leg?” doña Soledad yelled back from her room, and cackled.

I looked for some cooked food in the house. The pots were empty. There was nothing else for me to do

but to confront her again. My despair had turned into rage. I stormed into her room ready for a fight to the death. She was lying on her bed, covered with her shawl.

“Please forgive me for having done all those things to you,” she said bluntly, looking at the ceiling.

Her boldness stopped my rage.

“You must understand my position,” she went on. “I couldn’t let you go.”

She laughed softly, and in a clear, calm and very pleasing voice said that she was guilty of being greedy and clumsy, that she had nearly succeeded in scaring me away with her antics, but that the situation had suddenly changed. She paused and sat up in her bed, covering her breasts with her shawl, then added that a strange confidence had descended into her body. She looked up at the ceiling and moved her arms in a weird, rhythmical flow, like a windmill.

“There is no way for you to leave now,” she said.

She scrutinized me without laughing. My internal rage had subsided but my despair was more acute than ever. I honestly knew that in matters of sheer strength I was no match for her or the dog.

She said that our appointment had been set up years in advance, and that neither of us had enough power to hurry it, or break it.

“Don’t knock yourself out trying to leave,” she said. “That’s as useless as my trying to keep you here. Something besides your will will release you from here, and something besides my will will keep you here.”

Somehow her confidence had not only mellowed her, but had given her a great command over words. Her statements were compelling and crystal clear. Don Juan had always said that I was a trusting soul when it came to words. As she talked I found myself thinking that she was not really as threatening as I

thought. She no longer projected the feeling of having a chip on her shoulder. My reason was almost at ease but another part of me was not. All the muscles of my body were like tense wires, and yet I had to admit to myself that although she scared me out of my wits I found her most appealing. She watched me.

“I’ll show you how useless it is to try to leave,” she said, jumping out of bed. “I’m going to help you. What do you need?”

She observed me with a gleam in her eyes. Her small white teeth gave her smile a devilish touch. Her chubby face was strangely smooth and fairly free of wrinkles. Two deep lines running from the sides of her nose to the corners of her mouth gave her face the appearance of maturity, but not age. In standing up from the bed she casually let her shawl fall straight down, uncovering her full breasts. She did not bother to cover herself. Instead she swelled up her chest and lifted her breasts.

“Oh, you’ve noticed, eh?” she said, and rocked her body from side to side as if pleased with herself. “I always keep my hair tied behind my head. The Nagual told me to do so. The pull makes my face younger.”

I had been sure that she was going to talk about her breasts. Her shift was a surprise to me.

“I don’t mean that the pull on my hair is going to make me look younger,” she went on with a charming smile. “The pull on my hair makes me younger.”

“How is that possible?” I asked.

She answered me with a question. She wanted to know if I had correctly understood don Juan when he said that anything was possible if one wants it with unbending intent. I was after a more precise explanation. I wanted to know what else she did besides tying her hair, in order to look so young. She said that she lay in her bed and emptied herself of any thoughts and feelings and then let the lines of her floor pull her

wrinkles away. I pressed her for more details: any feelings, sensations, perceptions that she had experienced while lying on her bed. She insisted that she felt nothing, that she did not know how the lines in her floor worked, and that she only knew not to let her thoughts interfere.

She placed her hands on my chest and shoved me very gently. It seemed to be a gesture to show that she had had enough of my questions. We walked outside, through the back door. I told her that I needed a long stick. She went directly to a pile of firewood, but there were no long sticks. I asked her if she could get me a couple of nails in order to join together two pieces of firewood. We looked unsuccessfully all over the house for nails. As a final resort I had to dislodge the longest stick I could find in the chicken coop that Pablito had built in the back. The stick, although it was a bit flimsy, seemed suited for my purpose.

Doña Soledad had not smiled or joked during our search. She seemed to be utterly absorbed in her task of helping me. Her concentration was so intense that I had the feeling she was wishing me to succeed.

I walked to my car, armed with the long stick and a shorter one from the pile of firewood. Doña Soledad stood by the front door.

I began to tease the dog with the short stick in my right hand and at the same time I tried to release the safety lock with the long one in my other hand. The dog nearly bit my right hand and made me drop the short stick. The rage and power of the enormous beast were so immense that I nearly lost the long one too. The dog was about to bite it in two when doña Soledad came to my aid; pounding on the back window she drew the dog's attention and he let go of it.

Encouraged by her distracting maneuver I dove, headfirst, and slid across the length of the front seat and managed to release the safety lock. I tried to pull