

"You wanted me to answer a question. What was it?"

Francisco shook his head.

"You started asking me how can I . . . How can I what?"

Francisco's smile was like a moan of pain, the only moan he would permit himself. "I won't ask it, Mr. Rearden. I *know* it."

Chapter IV THE SANCTION OF THE VICTIM

The roast turkey had cost \$30. The champagne had cost \$25. The lace tablecloth, a cobweb of grapes and vine leaves iridescent in the candlelight, had cost \$2,000. The dinner service, with an artist's design burned in blue and gold into a translucent white china, had cost \$2,500. The silverware, which bore the initials LR in Empire wreaths of laurels, had cost \$3,000. But it was held to be unspiritual to think of money and of what that money represented.

A peasant's wooden shoe, gilded, stood in the center of the table, filled with marigolds, grapes and carrots. The candles were stuck into pumpkins that were cut as open-mouthed faces drooling raisins, nuts and candy upon the tablecloth.

It was Thanksgiving dinner, and the three who faced Rearden about the table were his wife, his mother and his brother.

"This is the night to thank the Lord for our blessings," said Rearden's mother. "God has been kind to us. There are people all over the country who haven't got any food in the house tonight, and some that haven't even got a house, and more of them going jobless every day. Gives me the creeps to look around in the city. Why, only last week, who do you suppose I ran into but Lucie Judson--Henry, do you remember Lucie Judson? Used to live next door to us, up in Minnesota, when you were ten-twelve years old. Had a boy about your age. I lost track of Lucie when they moved to New York, must have been all of twenty years ago. Well, it gave me the creeps to see what she's come to--just a toothless old hag, wrapped in a man's overcoat, panhandling on a street corner. And I thought: That could've been me, but for the grace of God."

"Well, if thanks are in order," said Lillian gaily. "I think that we shouldn't forget Gertrude, the new cook. She's an artist."

"Me, I'm just going to be old-fashioned," said Philip. "I'm just going to thank the sweetest mother in the world."

"Well, for the matter of that," said Rearden's mother, "we ought to thank Lillian for this dinner and for all the trouble she took to make it so pretty. She spent hours fixing the table. It's real quaint and different."

"It's the wooden shoe that does it," said Philip, bending his head sideways to study it in a manner of critical appreciation. "That's the real touch. Anybody can have candles, silverware and junk, that doesn't take anything but money--but this shoe, that took thought."

Rearden said nothing. The candlelight moved over his motionless face as over a portrait; the portrait bore an expression of impersonal courtesy.

"You haven't touched your wine," said his mother, looking at him.

"What I think is you ought to drink a toast in gratitude to the people of this country who have given you so much."

"Henry is not in the mood for it, Mother," said Lillian. "I'm afraid Thanksgiving is a holiday only for those who have a clear conscience." She raised her wine glass, but stopped it halfway to her lips and asked, "You're not going to make some sort of stand at your trial tomorrow, are you, Henry?"

"I am."

She put the glass down. "What are you going to do?"

"You'll see it tomorrow."

"You don't really imagine that you can get away with it!"

"I don't know what you have in mind as the object I'm to get away with."

"Do you realize that the charge against you is extremely serious?"

"I do."

"You've admitted that you sold the Metal to Ken Danagger."

"I have."

"They might send you to jail for ten years."

"I don't think they will, but it's possible."

"Have you been reading the newspapers, Henry?" asked Philip, with an odd kind of smile.

"No."

"Oh, you should!"

"Should I? Why?"

"You ought to see the names they call you!"

"That's interesting," said Rearden; he said it about the fact that Philip's smile was one of pleasure.

"I don't understand it," said his mother. "Jail? Did you say jail, Lillian? Henry, are you going to be sent to jail?"

"I might be."

"But that's ridiculous! Do something about it."

"What?"

"I don't know. I don't understand any of it. Respectable people don't go to jail. Do something. You've always known what to do about business."

"Not this kind of business."

"I don't believe it." Her voice had the tone of a frightened, spoiled child. "You're saying it just to be mean."

"He's playing the hero, Mother," said Lillian. She smiled coldly, turning to Rearden. "Don't you think that your attitude is perfectly futile?"

"No."

"You know that cases of this kind are not . . . intended ever to come to trial. There are ways to avoid it, to get things settled amicably—if one knows the right people."

"I don't know the right people."

"Look at Orren Boyle. He's done much more and much worse than your little fling at the black market, but he's smart enough to keep himself out of courtrooms."

"Then I'm not smart enough."

"Don't you think it's time you made an effort to adjust yourself to the conditions of our age?"

"No."

"Well, then I don't see how you can pretend that you're some sort of victim. If you go to jail, it will be your own fault."

"What pretense are you talking about, Lillian?"

"Oh, I know that you think you're fighting for some sort of principle—but actually it's only a matter of your incredible conceit. You're doing it for no better reason than because you think you're right."

"Do you think they're right?"

She shrugged. "That's the conceit I'm talking about—the idea that it matters who's right or wrong. It's the most insufferable form of vanity, this insistence on always doing right. How do you know what's right? How can anyone ever know it? It's nothing but a delusion to flatter your own ego and to hurt other people by flaunting your superiority over them."

He was looking at her with attentive interest. "Why should it hurt other people, if it's nothing but a delusion?"

"Is it necessary for me to point out that in *your* case it's nothing but hypocrisy? That is why I find your attitude preposterous. Questions of right have no bearing on human existence. And you're certainly nothing but human—aren't you, Henry? You're no better than any of the men you're going to face tomorrow. I think you should remember that it's not for you to make a stand on any sort of principle. Maybe you're a victim in this particular mess, maybe they're pulling a rotten trick on you, but what of it? They're doing it because they're weak; they couldn't resist the temptation to grab your Metal and to muscle in on your profits, because they had no other way of ever getting rich. Why should you blame them? It's only a question of different strains, but it's the same shoddy human fabric that gives way just as quickly. You wouldn't be tempted by money, because it's so easy for you to make it. But you wouldn't withstand other pressures and you'd fall just as ignominiously. Wouldn't you? So you have no right to any righteous indignation against them. You have no moral superiority to assert or to defend. And if you haven't, then what is the point of fighting a battle that you can't win? I suppose that one might find some satisfaction in being a martyr, if one is above reproach. But you—who are you to cast the first stone?"

She paused to observe the effect. There was none, except that his look of attentive interest seemed intensified; he listened as if he were held by some impersonal, scientific curiosity. It was not the response she had expected.

"I believe you understand me," she said.

"No," he answered quietly, "I don't."

"I think you should abandon the illusion of your own perfection, which you know full well to be an illusion. I think you should learn to get along with other people. The day of the hero is past. This is the day of humanity, in a much deeper sense than you imagine. Human beings are no longer expected to be saints nor to be punished for their sins. Nobody is right or wrong, we're all in it together, we're all human—and the human is the imperfect. You'll gain nothing