

bye," he said, "because I'll see you again in the not too distant future."

"Oh," she said eagerly, holding his hand clasped across the desk, "are you going to return?"

"No. You're going to join me."

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There was only a faint red breath above the structures in the darkness, as if the mills were asleep but alive, with the even breathing of the furnaces and the distant heartbeats of the conveyor belts to show it. Rearden stood at the window of his office, his hand pressed to the pane; in the perspective of distance, his hand covered half a mile of structures, as if he were trying to hold them.

He was looking at a long wall of vertical strips, which was the battery of coke ovens. A narrow door slid open with a brief gasp of flame, and a sheet of red-glowing coke came sliding out smoothly, like a slice of bread from the side of a giant toaster. It held still for an instant, then an angular crack shot through the slice and it crumbled into a gondola waiting on the rails below.

Danagger coal, he thought. These were the only words in his mind. The rest was a feeling of loneliness, so vast that even its own pain seemed swallowed in an enormous void.

Yesterday, Dagny had told him the story of her futile attempt and given him Danagger's message. This morning, he had heard the news that Danagger had disappeared. Through his sleepless night, then through the taut concentration on the duties of the day, his answer to the message had kept beating in his mind, the answer he would never have a chance to utter.

"The only man I ever loved." It came from Ken Danagger, who had never expressed anything more personal than "Look here. Rearden." He thought. Why had we let it go? Why had we both been condemned--in the hours away from our desks--to an exile among dreary strangers who had made us give up all desire for rest, for friendship, for the sound of human voices? Could I now reclaim a single hour spent listening to my brother Philip and give it to Ken Danagger? Who made it our duty to accept, as the only reward for our work, the gray torture of pretending love for those who roused us to nothing but contempt? We who were able to melt rock and metal for our purpose, why had we never sought that which we wanted from men?

He tried to choke the words in his mind, knowing that it was useless to think of them now. But the words were there and they were like words addressed to the dead: No, I don't damn you for leaving--if that is the question and the pain which you took away with you. Why didn't you give me a chance to tell you . . . what? that I approve? . . . no, but that I can neither blame you nor follow you.

Closing his eyes, he permitted himself to experience for a moment the immense relief he would feel if he, too, were to walk off, abandoning everything. Under the shock of his loss, he felt a thin thread of envy. Why didn't they come for me, too, whoever they are, and give me that irresistible reason which would make me go? But in the next moment, his shudder of anger told him that he would mur-

der the man who'd attempt to approach him, he would murder before he could hear the words of the secret that would take him away from his mills.

It was late, his staff had gone, but he dreaded the road to his house and the emptiness of the evening ahead. He felt as if the enemy who had wiped out Ken Danagger were waiting for him in the darkness beyond the glow of the mills. He was not invulnerable any longer, but whatever it was, he thought, wherever it came from, he was safe from it here, as in a circle of fires drawn about him to ward off evil.

He looked at the glittering white splashes on the dark windows of a structure in the distance; they were like motionless ripples of sunlight on water. It was the reflection of the neon sign that burned on the roof of the building above his head, saying: Rearden Steel. He thought of the night when he had wished to light a sign above his past, saying: Rearden Life. Why had he wished it? For whose eyes to see?

He thought—in bitter astonishment and for the first time—that the joyous pride he had once felt, had come from his respect for men, for the value of their admiration and their judgment. He did not feel it any longer. There were no men, he thought, to whose sight he could wish to offer that sign.

He turned brusquely away from the window. He seized his overcoat with the harsh sweep of a gesture intended to jolt him back into the discipline of action. He slammed the two folds of the overcoat about his body, he jerked the belt tight, then hastened to turn off the lights with rapid snaps of his hand on his way out of the office.

He threw the door open—and stopped. A single lamp was burning in a corner of the dimmed anteroom. The man who sat on the edge of a desk, in a pose of casual, patient waiting, was Francisco d'Anconia.

Rearden stood still and caught a brief instant when Francisco, not moving, looked at him with the hint of an amused smile that was like a wink between conspirators at a secret they both understood, but would not acknowledge. It was only an instant, almost too brief to grasp, because it seemed to him that Francisco rose at once at his entrance, with a movement of courteous deference. The movement suggested a strict formality, the denial of any attempt at presumption—but it stressed the intimacy of the fact that he uttered no word of greeting or explanation.

Rearden asked, his voice hard, "What are you doing here?"

"I thought that you would want to see me tonight, Mr. Rearden."

"Why?"

"For the same reason that has kept you so late in your office. You were not working."

"How long have you been sitting here?"

"An hour or two."

"Why didn't you knock at my door?"

"Would you have allowed me to come in?"

"You're late in asking that question."

"Shall I leave, Mr. Rearden?"

Rearden pointed to the door of his office. "Come in."

Turning the lights on in the office, moving with unhurried control, Rearden thought that he must not allow himself to feel anything, but felt the color of life returning to him in the tensely quiet eagerness of an emotion which he would not identify. What he told himself consciously was: Be careful.

He sat down on the edge of his desk, crossed his arms, looked at Francisco, who remained standing respectfully before him, and asked with the cold hint of a smile, "Why did you come here?"

"You don't want me to answer, Mr. Rearden. You wouldn't admit to me or to yourself how desperately lonely you are tonight. If you don't question me, you won't feel obliged to deny it. Just accept what you do know, anyway: that I know it."

Taut like a string pulled by anger against the impertinence at one end and by admiration for the frankness at the other, Rearden answered, "I'll admit it, if you wish. What should it matter to me, that you know it?"

"That I know and care, Mr. Rearden. I'm the only man around you who does."

"Why should you care? And why should I need your help tonight?"

"Because it's not easy to have to damn the man who meant most to you."

"I wouldn't damn you if you'd only stay away from me."

Francisco's eyes widened a little, then he grinned and said, "I was speaking of Mr. Danagger."

For an instant, Rearden looked as if he wanted to slap his own face, then he laughed softly and said, "All right. Sit down."

He waited to see what advantage Francisco would take of it now, but Francisco obeyed him in silence, with a smile that had an oddly boyish quality: a look of triumph and gratitude, together.

"I don't damn Ken Danagger," said Rearden.

"You don't?" The two words seemed to fall with a singular emphasis; they were pronounced very quietly, almost cautiously, with no remnant of a smile on Francisco's face.

"No. I don't try to prescribe how much a man should have to bear. If he broke, it's not for me to judge him."

"If he broke . . . ?"

"Well, didn't he?"

Francisco leaned back; his smile returned, but it was not a happy smile. "What will his disappearance do to you?"

"I will just have to work a little harder."

Francisco looked at a steel bridge traced in black strokes against red steam beyond the window, and said, pointing, "Every one of those girders has a limit to the load it can carry. What's yours?"

Rearden laughed. "Is *that* what you're afraid of? Is that why you came here? Were you afraid I'd break? Did you want to save me, as Dagny Taggart wanted to save Ken Danagger? She tried to reach him in time, but couldn't."

"She did? I didn't know it. Miss Taggart and I disagree about many things."