"I have not asked for protection."

"But surely you realize that we're in a position to be of value to you, and if there's anything you want from us, any . . ."

"There isn't."

"But you must have problems you'd like to discuss with us."

"I haven't."

"Then . . . well, then"—giving up the attempt at the play of granting a favor, Holloway switched to an open plea—"then won't you just give us a hearing?"

"If you have anything to say to me."

"We have, Mr. Rearden, we certainly have! That's all we're asking for—a hearing. Just give us a chance. Just come to this conference. You wouldn't be committing yourself to anything—" He said it involuntarily, and stopped, hearing a bright, mocking stab of life in Rearden's voice, an unpromising sound, as Rearden answered:

"I know it."

"Well, I mean . . . that is . . well, then, will you come?"

"All right," said Rearden. "I'll come."

He did not listen to Holloway's assurances of gratitude, he noted only that Holloway kept repeating, "At seven P.M., November fourth, Mr. Rearden . . . November fourth . . ." as if the date had some special significance.

Rearden dropped the receiver and lay back in his chair, looking at the glow of furnace flames on the ceiling of his office. He knew that the conference was a trap; he knew also that he was walking into it with nothing for any trappers to gain.

Tinky Holloway dropped the receiver, in his Washington office, and sat up tensely, frowning. Claude Slagenhop, president of Friends of Global Progress, who had sat in an armchair, nervously chewing a matchstick, glanced up at him and asked, "Not so good?"

Holloway shook his head. "He'll come, but . . no, not so good." He added, "I don't think he'll take it."

"That's what my punk told me."

"I know."

"The punk said we'd better not try it."

"God damn your punk! We've got to! We'll have to risk it!"

The punk was Philip Rearden who, weeks ago, had reported to Claude Slagenhop: "No, he won't let me in, he won't give me a job. I've tried, as you wanted me to, I've tried my best, but it's no use, he won't let me set foot inside his mills. And as to his frame of mind—listen, it's bad. It's worse than anything I expected. I know him and I can tell you that you won't have a chance. He's pretty much at the end of his rope. One more squeeze will snap it. You said the big boys wanted to know. Tell them not to do it. Tell them he . . . Claude, God help us, if they do it, they'll lose him!" "Well, you're not of much help," Slagenhop had said dryly, turning away. Philip had seized his sleeve and asked, his voice shrinking suddenly into open anxiety, "Say, Claude . . . according to . . . to Directive 10-289 . . . if he goes, there's . . . there's to be no heirs?" "That's right." "They'd seize the mills and . . . and everything?" "That's the law." "But . . . Claude, they wouldn't do that to *me*, would they?"

"They don't want him to go. You know that. Hold him, if you can." "But I can't! You know I can't! Because of my political ideas and . . . and everything I've done for you, you know what he thinks of me! I have no hold on him at all!" "Well, that's *your* tough luck." "Claude!" Philip had cried in panic. "Claude, they won't leave me out in the cold, will they? I belong, don't I? They've always said I belonged, they've always said they needed me . . . they said they needed men like me, not like him, men with my . . . my sort of spirit, remember? And after all I've done for them, after all my faith and service and loyalty to the cause—" "You damn fool," Slagenhop had snapped, "of what use are you to us without *him*?"

On the morning of November 4, Hank Rearden was awakened by the ringing of the telephone. He opened his eyes to the sight of a clear, pale sky, the sky of early dawn, in the windows of his bedroom, a sky the delicate color of aquamarine, with the first rays of an invisible sun giving a shade of porcelain pink to Philadelphia's ancient roof tops. For a moment, while his consciousness had a purity to equal the sky's, while he was aware of nothing but himself and had not yet reharnessed his soul to the burden of alien memories, he lay still, held by the sight and by the enchantment of a world to match it, a world where the style of existence would be a continuous morning.

The telephone threw him back into exile: it was screaming at spaced intervals, like a nagging, chronic cry for help, the kind of cry that did not belong in his world. He lifted the receiver, frowning. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Henry," said a quavering voice; it was his mother.

"Mother—at this hour?" he asked dryly.

"Oh, you're always up at dawn, and I wanted to catch you before you went to the office."

"Yes? What is it?"

"I've got to see you, Henry. I've got to speak to you. Today. Sometime today. It's important."

"Has anything happened?"

"No . . . yes . . . that is . . . I've got to have a talk with you in person. Will you come?"

"I'm sorry, I can't. I have an appointment in New York tonight. If you want me to come tomorrow—"

"No! No, not tomorrow. It's got to be today. It's got to." There was a dim tone of panic in her voice, but it was the stale panic of chronic helplessness, not the sound of an emergency—except for an odd echo of fear in her mechanical insistence.

"What is it, Mother?"

"I can't talk about it over the telephone. I've got to see you."

"Then if you wish to come to the office—"

"No! Not at the office! I've got to see you alone, where we can talk. Can't you come here today, as a favor? It's your mother who's asking you a favor. You've never come to see us at all. And maybe you're not the one to blame for it, either. But can't you do it for me this once, if I beg you to?"

"All right, Mother. I'll be there at four o'clock this afternoon."

"That will be fine, Henry. Thank you, Henry. That will be fine."

It seemed to him that there was a touch of tension in the air of the mills, that day. It was a touch too slight to define—but the mills, to him, were like the face of a loved wife where he could catch shades of feeling almost ahead of expression. He noticed small clusters of the new workers, just three or four of them huddling together in conversation—once or twice too often. He noticed their manner, a manner suggesting a poolroom corner, not a factory. He noticed a few glances thrown at him as he went by, glances a shade too pointed and lingering. He dismissed it: it was not quite enough to wonder about—and he had no time to wonder.

When he drove up to his former home, that afternoon, he stopped his car abruptly at the foot of the hill. He had not seen the house since that May 15, six months ago, when he had walked out of it—and the sight brought back to him the sum of all he had felt in ten years of daily home-coming: the strain, the bewilderment, the gray weight of unconfessed unhappiness, the stern endurance that forbade him to confess it, the desperate innocence of the effort to understand his family . . . the effort to be just.

He walked slowly up the path toward the door. He felt no emotion, only the sense of a great, solemn clarity. He knew that this house was a monument of guilt—of his guilt toward himself.

He had expected to see his mother and Philip; he had not expected the third person who rose, as they did, at his entrance into the living room: it was Lillian.

He stopped on the threshold. They stood looking at his face and at the open door behind him. Their faces had a look of fear and cunning, the look of that blackmail-through-virtue which he had learned to understand, as if they hoped to get away with it by means of nothing but his pity, to hold him trapped, when a single step back could take him out of their reach.

They had counted on his pity and dreaded his anger; they had not dared consider the third alternative: his indifference.

"What is she doing here?" he asked, turning to his mother, his voice dispassionately flat.

"Lillian's been living here ever since your divorce," she answered defensively. "I couldn't let her starve on the city pavements, could I?"

The look in his mother's eyes was half-plea, as if she were begging him not to slap her face, half-triumph, as if she had slapped his. He knew her motive: it was not compassion, there had never been much love between Lillian and her, it was their common revenge against him, it was the secret satisfaction of spending his money on the ex-wife he had refused to support.

Lillian's head was poised to bow in greeting, with the tentative hint of a smile on her lips, half-timid, half-brash. He did not pretend to ignore her; he looked at her, as if he were seeing her fully, yet as if no presence were being registered in his mind. He said nothing, closed the door and stepped into the room.

His mother gave a small sigh of uneasy relief and dropped hastily