

Rearden that he was seeing. He looked as if he were facing another presence in the room and as if his glance were saying: If this is what you demand of me, then even this is yours, yours to accept and mine to endure, there is no more than this in me to offer you, but let me be proud to know that I can offer so much. She saw—with a single artery beating under the skin of his throat, with a froth of pink in the corner of his mouth—the look of an enraptured dedication which was almost a smile, and she knew that she was witnessing Francisco d'Anconia's greatest achievement.

When she felt herself shaking and heard her own voice, it seemed to meet the last echo of her scream in the air of the room—and she realized how brief a moment had passed between. Her voice had the savage sound of rising to deliver a blow and it was crying to Rearden:

“—to protect me from *him*? Long before you ever—”

“Don't!” Francisco's head jerked to her, the brief snap of his voice held all of his unreleased violence, and she knew it was an order that had to be obeyed.

Motionless but for the slow curve of his head, Francisco turned to Rearden. She saw his hands leave the edge of the table and hang relaxed by his sides. It was Rearden that he was now seeing, and there was nothing in Francisco's face except the exhaustion of effort, but Rearden knew suddenly how much this man had loved him.

“Within the extent of your knowledge,” Francisco said quietly, “you are right.”

Neither expecting nor permitting an answer, he turned to leave. He bowed to Dagny, inclining his head in a manner that appeared as a simple gesture of leaving-taking to Rearden, as a gesture of acceptance to her. Then he left.

Rearden stood looking after him, knowing—without context and with absolute certainty—that he would give his life for the power not to have committed the action he had committed.

When he turned to Dagny, his face looked drained, open and faintly attentive, as if he were not questioning her about the words she had cut off, but were waiting for them to come.

A shudder of pity ran through her body and ended in the movement of shaking her head: she did not know for which of the two men the pity was intended, but it made her unable to speak and she shook her head over and over again, as if trying desperately to negate some vast, impersonal suffering that had made them all its victims.

“If there's something that must be said, say it.” His voice was toneless.

The sound she made was half-chuckle, half-moan—it was not a desire for vengeance, but a desperate sense of justice that drove the cutting bitterness of her voice, as she cried, consciously throwing the words at his face, “You wanted to know the name of that other man? The man I slept with? The man who had me first? It was Francisco d'Anconia!”

She saw the force of the blow by seeing his face swept blank. She knew that if justice was her purpose, she had achieved it—because this slap was worse than the one he had dealt.

She felt suddenly calm, knowing that her words had had to be said for the sake of all three of them. The despair of a helpless victim left her, she was not a victim any longer, she was one of the contestants, willing to bear the responsibility of action. She stood facing him, waiting for any answer he would choose to give her, feeling almost as if it were her turn to be subjected to violence.

She did not know what form of torture he was enduring, or what he saw being wrecked within him and kept himself the only one to see. There was no sign of pain to give her any warning; he looked as if he were just a man who stood still in the middle of a room, making his consciousness absorb a fact that it refused to absorb. Then she noticed that he did not change his posture, that even his hands hung by his sides with the fingers half-bent as they had been for a long time, it seemed to her that she could feel the heavy numbness of the blood stopping in his fingers--and this was the only clue to his suffering she was able to find, but it told her that that which he felt left him no power to feel anything else, not even the existence of his own body. She waited, her pity vanishing and becoming respect.

Then she saw his eyes move slowly from her face down the length of her body, and she knew the sort of torture he was now choosing to experience, because it was a glance of a nature he could not hide from her. She knew that he was seeing her as she had been at seventeen, he was seeing her with the rival he hated, he was seeing them together as they would be now, a sight he could neither endure nor resist. She saw the protection of control dropping from his face, but he did not care whether he let her see his face alive and naked, because there now was nothing to read in it except an unrevealing violence, some part of which resembled hatred.

He seized her shoulders, and she felt prepared to accept that he would now kill her or beat her into unconsciousness, and in the moment when she felt certain that he had thought of it, she felt her body thrown against him and his mouth falling on hers, more brutally than the act of a beating would have permitted.

She found herself, in terror, twisting her body to resist, and, in exultation, twisting her arms around him, holding him, letting her lips bring blood to his, knowing that she had never wanted him as she did in this moment.

When he threw her down on the couch, she knew, to the rhythm of the beat of his body, that it was the act of his victory over his rival and of his surrender to him, the act of ownership brought to unendurable violence by the thought of the man whom it was defying, the act of transforming his hatred for the pleasure that man had known into the intensity of his own pleasure, his conquest of that man by means of her body--she felt Francisco's presence through Rearden's mind, she felt as if she were surrendering to both men, to that which she had worshipped in both of them, that which they held in common, that essence of character which had made of her love for each an act of loyalty to both. She knew also that this was his rebellion against the world around them, against its worship of degradation, against the long torment of his wasted days and lightless