

feeling that would hold, as their sum, as their final expression, the purpose of all the things she loved on earth . . . To find a consciousness like her own, who would be the meaning of her world, as she would be of his . . . No, not Francisco d'Anconia, not Hank Rearden, not any man she had ever met or admired . . . A man who existed only in her knowledge of her capacity for an emotion she had never felt, but would have given her life to experience . . . She twisted herself in a slow, faint movement, her breasts pressed to the desk; she felt the longing in her muscles, in the nerves of her body.

Is that what you want? Is it as simple as that? she thought, but knew that it was not simple. There was some unbreakable link between her love for her work and the desire of her body; as if one gave her the right to the other, the right and the meaning; as if one were the completion of the other—and the desire would never be satisfied, except by a being of equal greatness.

Her face pressed to her arm, she moved her head, shaking it slowly in negation. She would never find it. Her own thought of what life could be like, was all she would ever have of the world she had wanted. Only the thought of it—and a few rare moments, like a few lights reflected from it on her way—to know, to hold, to follow to the end . . .

She raised her head.

On the pavement of the alley, outside her window, she saw the shadow of a man who stood at the door of her office.

The door was some steps away; she could not see him, or the street light beyond, only his shadow on the stones of the pavement. He stood perfectly still.

He was so close to the door, like a man about to enter, that she waited to hear him knock. Instead, she saw the shadow jerk abruptly, as if he were jolted backward, then he turned and walked away. There was only the outline of his hat brim and shoulders left on the ground, when he stopped. The shadow lay still for a moment, wavered, and grew longer again as he came back.

She felt no fear. She sat at her desk, motionless, watching in blank wonder. He stopped at the door, then backed away from it; he stood somewhere in the middle of the alley, then paced restlessly and stopped again. His shadow swung like an irregular pendulum across the pavement, describing the course of a soundless battle: it was a man fighting himself to enter that door or to escape.

She looked on, with peculiar detachment. She had no power to react, only to observe. She wondered numbly, distantly: Who was he? Had he been watching her from somewhere in the darkness? Had he seen her slumped across her desk, in the lighted, naked window? Had he watched her desolate loneliness as she was now watching his? She felt nothing. They were alone in the silence of a dead city—it seemed to her that he was miles away, a reflection of suffering without identity, a fellow survivor whose problem was as distant to her as hers would be to him. He paced, moving out of her sight, coming back again. She sat, watching—on the glistening pavement of a dark alley—the shadow of an unknown torment.

The shadow moved away once more. She waited. It did not return.

Then she leaped to her feet. She had wanted to see the outcome of the battle; now that he had won it—or lost—she was struck by the sudden, urgent need to know his identity and motive. She ran through the dark anteroom, she threw the door open and looked out.

The alley was empty. The pavement went tapering off into the distance, like a band of wet mirror under a few spaced lights. There was no one in sight. She saw the dark hole of a broken window in an abandoned shop. Beyond it, there were the doors of a few rooming houses. Across the alley, streaks of rain glittered under a light that hung over the black gap of an open door leading down to the underground tunnels of Taggart Transcontinental

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Rearden signed the papers, pushed them across the desk and looked away, thinking that he would never have to think of them again, wishing he were carried to the time when this moment would be far behind him.

Paul Larkin reached for the papers hesitantly; he looked ingratiatingly helpless. "It's only a legal technicality, Hank," he said. "You know that I'll always consider these ore mines as yours."

Rearden shook his head slowly; it was just a movement of his neck muscles; his face looked immovable, as if he were speaking to a stranger. "No," he said. "Either I own a property or I don't."

"But . . . but you know that you can trust me. You don't have to worry about your supply of ore. We've made an agreement. You know that you can count on me."

"I don't know it. I hope I can."

"But I've given you my word."

"I have never been at the mercy of anyone's word before."

"Why . . . why do you say that? We're friends. I'll do anything you wish. You'll get my entire output. The mines are still yours—just as good as yours. You have nothing to fear. I'll . . . Hank, what's the matter?"

"Don't talk."

"But . . . but what's the matter?"

"I don't like assurances. I don't want any pretense about how safe I am. I'm not. We have made an agreement which I can't enforce. I want you to know that I understand my position fully. If you intend to keep your word, don't talk about it, just *do it*."

"Why do you look at me as if it were my fault? You know how badly I feel about it. I bought the mines only because I thought it would help you out—I mean, I thought you'd rather sell them to a friend than to some total stranger. It's not my fault. I don't like that miserable Equalization Bill, I don't know who's behind it, I never dreamed they'd pass it, it was such a shock to me when they —"

"Never mind."

"But I only—"

"Why do you insist on talking about it?"

"I . . ." Larkin's voice was pleading. "I gave you the best price, Hank. The law said 'reasonable compensation.' My bid was higher than anyone else's."

Rearden looked at the papers still lying across the desk. He