

"No!" It was an involuntary cry and it sounded futile, with its passionate sincerity offered—to be rejected—as its only proof.

"No? Then are you here on a matter of business? Are you setting a trap, as you did for me? What sort of double-cross are you preparing for her?"

"My purpose . . . was not . . . a matter of business."

"Then what was it?"

"If you still care to believe me, I can tell you only that it involved no . . . betrayal of any kind."

"Do you think that you may still discuss betrayal, in my presence?"

"I will answer you some day. I cannot answer you now."

"You don't like to be reminded of it, do you? You've stayed away from me since, haven't you? You didn't expect to see me here? You didn't want to face me?" But he knew that Francisco was facing him as no one else did these days—he saw the eyes held straight to meet his, the features composed, without emotion, without defense or appeal, set to endure whatever was coming—he saw the open, unprotected look of courage—this was the face of the man he had loved, the man who had set him free of guilt—and he found himself fighting against the knowledge that this face still held him, above all else, above his month of impatience for the sight of Dagny. "Why don't you defend yourself, if you have nothing to hide? Why are you here? Why were you stunned to see me enter?"

"Hank, stop it!" Dagny's voice was a cry, and she drew back, knowing that violence was the most dangerous element to introduce into this moment

Both men turned to her. "Please let me be the one to answer," Francisco said quietly.

"I told you that I hoped I'd never see him again," said Rearden. "I'm sorry if it has to be here. It doesn't concern you, but there's something he must be paid for."

"If that is . . . your purpose," Francisco said with effort, "haven't you . . . achieved it already?"

"What's the matter?" Rearden's face was frozen, his lips barely moving, but his voice had the sound of a chuckle. "Is this your way of asking for mercy?"

The instant of silence was Francisco's strain to a greater effort.

"Yes . . . if you wish," he answered

"Did you grant it when you held my future in your hands?"

"You are justified in anything you wish to think of me. But since it doesn't concern Miss Taggart . . . would you now permit me to leave?"

"No! Do you want to evade it, like all those other cowards? Do you want to escape?"

"I will come anywhere you require any time you wish. But I would rather it were not in Miss Taggart's presence."

"Why not? I want it to be in her presence, since this is the one place you had no right to come. I have nothing left to protect from you, you've taken more than the looters can ever take, you've destroyed everything you've touched, but here is one thing you're not going to

touch." He knew that the rigid absence of emotion in Francisco's face was the strongest evidence of emotion, the evidence of some abnormal effort at control—he knew that this was torture and that he, Rearden, was driven blindly by a feeling which resembled a torturer's enjoyment, except that he was now unable to tell whether he was torturing Francisco or himself. "You're worse than the looters, because you betray with full understanding of that which you're betraying. I don't know what form of corruption is your motive—but I want you to learn that there are things beyond your reach, beyond your aspiration or your malice."

"You have nothing . . . to fear from me . . . now."

"I want you to learn that you are not to think of her, not to look at her, not to approach her. Of all men, it's you who're not to appear in her presence." He knew that he was driven by a desperate anger at his own feeling for this man, that the feeling still lived, that it was this feeling which he had to outrage and destroy. "Whatever your motive, it's from any contact with you that she has to be protected."

"If I gave you my word—" He stopped.

Rearden chuckled. "I know what they mean, your words, your convictions, your friendship and your oath by the only woman you ever—" He stopped. They all knew what this meant, in the same instant that Rearden knew it.

He made a step toward Francisco: he asked, pointing at Dagny, his voice low and strangely unlike his own voice, as if it neither came from nor were addressed to a living person, "Is this the woman you love?"

Francisco closed his eyes.

"Don't ask him that!" The cry was Dagny's.

"Is this the woman you love?"

Francisco answered, looking at her, "Yes."

Rearden's hand rose, swept down and slapped Francisco's face.

The scream came from Dagny. When she could see again—after an instant that felt as if the blow had struck her own cheek—Francisco's hands were the first thing she saw. The heir of the d'Anconias stood thrown back against a table, clasping the edge behind him, not to support himself, but to stop his own hands. She saw the rigid stillness of his body, a body that was pulled too straight but seemed broken, with the slight, unnatural angles of his waistline and shoulders, with his arms held stiff but slanted back—he stood as if the effort not to move were turning the force of his violence against himself, as if the motion he resisted were running through his muscles as a tearing pain. She saw his convulsed fingers struggling to grow fast to the table's edge, she wondered which would break first, the wood of the table or the bones of the man, and she knew that Rearden's life hung in the balance.

When her eyes moved up to Francisco's face, she saw no sign of struggle, only the skin of his temples pulled tight and the planes of his cheeks drawn inward, seeming faintly more hollow than usual. It made his face look naked, pure and young. She felt terror because she was seeing in his eyes the tears which were not there. His eyes were brilliant and dry. He was looking at Rearden, but it was not