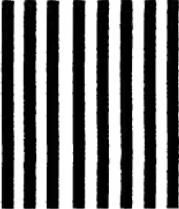


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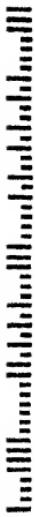
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some extra armor plate for yourself—because I'm going to report this to the police and give them every clue I can to set them on your trail."

Danneskjöld did not move or answer. A freight train was rolling by, somewhere in the distance and darkness; they could not see it, but they heard the pounding beat of wheels filling the silence, and it seemed close, as if a disembodied train, reducing to a long string of sound, were going past them in the night.

"You wanted to help me in my most hopeless hour?" said Rearden. "If I am brought to where my only defender is a pirate, then I don't care to be defended any longer. You speak some remnant of a human language, so in the name of that, I'll tell you that I have no hope left, but I have the knowledge that when the end comes, I will have lived by my own standards, even while I was the only one to whom they remained valid. I will have lived in the world in which I started and I will go down with the last of it. I don't think you'll want to understand me, but..."

A beam of light hit them with the violence of a physical blow. The clangor of the train had swallowed the noise of the motor and they had not heard the approach of the car that swept out of the side road, from behind the farmhouse. They were not in the car's path, yet they heard the screech of brakes behind the two headlights, pulling an invisible shape to a stop. It was Rearden who jumped back involuntarily and had time to marvel at his companion: the swiftness of Danneskjöld's self-control was that he did not move.

It was a police car and it stopped beside them.

The driver leaned out. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Rearden!" he said, touching his fingers to his cap. "Good evening, sir."

"Hello," said Rearden, fighting to control the unnatural abruptness of his voice.

There were two patrolmen in the front seat of the car and their faces had a tight look of purpose, not the look of their usual friendly intention to stop for a chat.

"Mr. Rearden, did you walk from the mills by way of Edgewood Road, past Blacksmith Cove?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Did you happen to see a man anywhere around these parts, a stranger moving along in a hurry?"

"Where?"

"He'd be either on foot or in a battered wreck of a car that's got a million-dollar motor."

"What man?"

"A tall man with blond hair."

"Who is he?"

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you, Mr. Rearden. Did you see him?"

Rearden was not aware of his own questions, only of the astonishing fact that he was able to force sounds past some beating barrier inside his throat. He was looking straight at the policeman, but he felt as if the focus of his eyes had switched to his side vision, and what he saw most clearly was Danneskjöld's face watching him with

no expression, with no line's, no muscle's worth of feeling. He saw Danneskjöld's arms hanging idly by his sides, the hands relaxed, with no sign of intention to reach for a weapon, leaving the tall, straight body defenseless and open—open as to a firing squad. He saw, in the light, that the face looked younger than he had thought and that the eyes were sky-blue. He felt that his one danger would be to glance directly at Danneskjöld—and he kept his eyes on the policeman, on the brass buttons of a blue uniform, but the object filling his consciousness, more forcefully than a visual perception, was Danneskjöld's body, the naked body under the clothes, the body that would be wiped out of existence. He did not hear his own words, because he kept hearing a single sentence in his mind, without context except the feeling that it was the only thing that mattered to him in the world: "If I should lose my life, to what better purpose could I give it?"

"Did you see him, Mr. Rearden?"

"No," said Rearden. "I didn't."

The policeman shrugged regretfully and closed his hands about the steering wheel. "You didn't see any man that looked suspicious?"

"No."

"Nor any strange car passing you on the road?"

"No."

The policeman reached for the starter. "They got word that he was seen ashore in these parts tonight, and they've thrown a dragnet over five counties. We're not supposed to mention his name, not to scare folks, but he's a man whose head is worth three million dollars in rewards from all over the world."

He had pressed the starter and the motor was churning the air with bright cracks of sound, when the second policeman leaned forward. He had been looking at the blond hair under Danneskjöld's cap.

"Who is that, Mr. Rearden?" he asked.

"My new bodyguard," said Rearden.

"Oh . . . ! A sensible precaution, Mr. Rearden, in times like these."

"Good night, sir."

The motor jerked forward. The red taillights of the car went shrinking down the road. Danneskjöld watched it go, then glanced pointedly at Rearden's right hand. Rearden realized that he had stood facing the policemen with his hand clutching the gun in his pocket and that he had been prepared to use it.

He opened his fingers and drew his hand out hastily. Danneskjöld smiled. It was a smile of radiant amusement, the silent laughter of a clear, young spirit greeting a moment it was glad to have lived. And although the two did not resemble each other, the smile made Rearden think of Francisco d'Anconia.

"You haven't told a lie," said Ragnar Danneskjöld. "Your bodyguard—that's what I am and what I'll deserve to be, in many more ways than you can know at present. Thanks, Mr. Rearden, and so long—we'll meet again much sooner than I had hoped."

He was gone before Rearden could answer. He vanished beyond the stone fence, as abruptly and soundlessly as he had come. When