

"But there's no reason whatever to take it. There's nothing left that Ragnar and I can't finish."

Hugh Akston was watching them silently, leaning back in his chair; his face had that look of intensity, neither quite bitterness nor quite a smile, with which a man watches a progression that interests him, but that lags a few steps behind his vision.

"If I go back," said Galt, "it won't be for our work. It will be to win the only thing I want from the world for myself, now that the work is done. I've taken nothing from the world and I've wanted nothing. But there's one thing which it's still holding and which is mine and which I won't let it have. No, I don't intend to break my oath, I won't deal with the looters, I won't be of any value or help to anyone out there, neither to looters nor neutrals—nor scabs. If I go, it won't be for anyone's sake but mine—and I don't think I'm risking my life, but if I am—well, I'm now free to risk it."

He was not looking at her, but she had to turn away and stand pressed against the window frame, because her hands were trembling.

"But, John!" cried Mulligan, waving his arm at the valley, "if anything happens to you, what would we—" He stopped abruptly and guiltily.

Galt chuckled. "What were you about to say?" Mulligan waved his hand sheepishly, in a gesture of dismissal. "Were you about to say that if anything happens to me, I'll die as the worst failure in the world?"

"All right," said Mulligan guiltily, "I won't say it. I won't say that we couldn't get along without you—we can. I won't beg you to stay here for our sake—I didn't think I'd ever revert to that rotten old plea, but, boy!—what a temptation it was, I can almost see why people do it. I know that whatever it is you want, if you wish to risk your life, that's all there is to it—but I'm thinking only that it's oh God, John, it's such a valuable life!"

Galt smiled. "I know it. That's why I don't think I'm risking it—I think I'll win."

Francisco was now silent. he was watching Galt intently, with a frown of wonder, not as if he had found an answer, but as if he had suddenly glimpsed a question.

"Look, John," said Mulligan, "since you haven't decided whether you'll go—you haven't decided it yet, have you?"

"No, not yet."

"Since you haven't, would you let me remind you of a few things, just for you to consider?"

"Go ahead."

"It's the chance dangers that I'm afraid of—the senseless, unpredictable dangers of a world falling apart. Consider the physical risks of complex machinery in the hands of blind fools and fear-crazed cowards. Just think of their railroads—you'd be taking a chance on some such horror as that Winston tunnel incident every time you stepped aboard a train—and there will be more incidents of that kind, coming faster and faster. They'll reach the stage where no day will pass without a major wreck."

"I know it."

"And the same will be happening in every other industry, wherever machines are used—the machines which they thought could replace our minds. Plane crashes, oil tank explosions, blast-furnace break-outs, high-tension wire electrocutions, subway cave-ins and trestle collapses—they'll see them all. The very machines that had made their life so safe, will now make it a continuous peril."

"I know it."

"I know that you know it, but have you considered it in every specific detail? Have you allowed yourself to visualize it? I want you to see the exact picture of what it is that you propose to enter—before you decide whether anything can justify *your* entering it. You know that the cities will be hit worst of all. The cities were made by the railroads and will go with them."

"That's right."

"When the rails are cut, the city of New York will starve in two days. That's all the supply of food it's got. It's fed by a continent three thousand miles long. How will they carry food to New York? By directive and oxcart? But first, before it happens, they'll go through the whole of the agony—through the shrinking, the shortages, the hunger riots, the stampeding violence in the midst of the growing stillness."

"They will."

"They'll lose their airplanes first, then their automobiles, then their trucks, then their horsecarts."

"They will."

"Their factories will stop, then their furnaces and their radios. Then their electric light system will go."

"It will."

"There's only a worn thread holding that continent together. There will be one train a day, then one train a week—then the Taggart Bridge will collapse and—"

"No, it won't!"

It was her voice and they whirled to her. Her face was white, but calmer than it had been when she had answered them last.

Slowly, Galt rose to his feet and inclined his head, as in acceptance of a verdict. "You have made your decision," he said.

"I have."

"Dagny," said Hugh Akston. "I'm sorry." He spoke softly, with effort, as if his words were struggling and failing to fill the silence of the room. "I wish it were possible not to see this happen, I would have preferred anything—except to see you stay here by default of the courage of your convictions."

She spread her hands, palms out, her arms at her sides, in a gesture of simple frankness, and said, addressing them all, her manner so calm that she could afford to show emotion, "I want you to know this: I have wished it were possible for me to die in one more month, so that I could spend it in this valley. This is how much I've wanted to remain. But so long as I choose to go on living, I can't desert a battle which I think is mine to fight."

"Of course," said Mulligan respectfully, "if you still think it."

"If you want to know the one reason that's taking me back, I'll tell you: I cannot bring myself to abandon to destruction all the greatness of the world, all that which was mine and yours, which was made by us and is still ours by right—because I cannot believe that men can refuse to see, that they can remain blind and deaf to us forever, when the truth is ours and their lives depend on accepting it. They still love their lives—and *that* is the uncorrupted remnant of their minds. So long as men desire to live, I cannot lose my battle."

"Do they?" said Hugh Akston softly. "Do they desire it? No, don't answer me now. I know that the answer was the hardest thing for any of us to grasp and to accept. Just take that question back with you, as the last premise left for you to check."

"You're leaving as our friend," said Midas Mulligan, "and we'll be fighting everything you'll do, because we know you're wrong, but it's not you that we'll be damning."

"You'll come back," said Hugh Akston, "because yours is an error of knowledge, not a moral failure, not an act of surrender to evil, but only the last act of being victim to your own virtue. We'll wait for you—and, Dagny, when you come back, you will have discovered that there need never be any conflict among your desires, nor so tragic a clash of values as the one you've borne so well."

"Thank you," she said, closing her eyes.

"We must discuss the conditions of your departure," said Galt; he spoke in the dispassionate manner of an executive. "First, you must give us your word that you will not disclose our secret or any part of it—neither our cause nor our existence nor this valley nor your whereabouts for the past month—to anyone in the outer world, not at any time or for any purpose whatsoever."

"I give you my word."

"Second, you must never attempt to find this valley again. You are not to come here uninvited. Should you break the first condition, it will not place us in serious danger. Should you break the second—it will. It is not our policy ever to be at the arbitrary mercy of the good faith of another person, or at the mercy of a promise that cannot be enforced. Nor can we expect you to place our interests above your own. Since you believe that your course is right, the day may come when you may find it necessary to lead our enemies to this valley. We shall, therefore, leave you no means to do it. You will be taken out of the valley by plane, blindfolded, and you will be flown a distance sufficient to make it impossible for you ever to retrace the course."

She inclined her head. "You are right."

"Your plane has been repaired. Do you wish to reclaim it by signing a draft on your account at the 'Mulligan Bank'?"

"No."

"Then we shall hold it, until such time as you choose to pay for it. Day after tomorrow, I will take you in my plane to a point outside the valley and leave you within reach of further transportation."

She inclined her head. "Very well."

It had grown dark, when they left Midas Mulligan's. The trail back to Galt's house led across the valley, past Francisco's cabin, and the