

"I'm asking the questions!"

"I'm not answering them."

"Oh, you're not, are you?" snarled Pete, who had but one recourse when in doubt: his hand jerked to the gun on his hip.

Francisco's hand was too fast for the two men to see its motion, and his gun was too silent. What they saw and heard next was the gun flying out of Pete's hand, along with a splatter of blood from his shattered fingers, and his muffled howl of pain. He collapsed, groaning. In the instant when the second guard grasped it, he saw that Francisco's gun was aimed at him.

"Don't shoot, mister!" he cried.

"Come down here with your hands up," ordered Francisco, holding his gun aimed with one hand and waving a signal to the crack of the door with the other.

By the time the guard descended the stairs, Rearden was there to disarm him, and Danneskjöld to tie his hands and feet. The sight of Dagny seemed to frighten him more than the rest; he could not understand it: the three men wore caps and windbreakers, and, but for their manner, could be taken for a gang of highwaymen; the presence of a lady was inexplicable.

"Now," said Francisco, "where is your chief?"

The guard jerked his head in the direction of the stairs. "Up there."

"How many guards are there in the building?"

"Nine."

"Where are they?"

"One's on the cellar stairs. The others are all up there."

"Where?"

"In the big laboratory. The one with the window."

"All of them?"

"Yes."

"What are these rooms?" He pointed at the doors leading off the hall.

"They're labs, too. They're locked for the night."

"Who's got the key?"

"Him." He jerked his head at Pete.

Rearden and Danneskjold took the key from Pete's pocket and hurried soundlessly to check the rooms, while Francisco continued. "Are there any other men in the building?"

"No."

"Isn't there a prisoner here?"

"Oh . . . yeah, I guess so. There must be, or they wouldn't've kept us all on duty."

"Is he still here?"

"That, I don't know. They'd never tell us."

"Is Dr. Ferris here?"

"No. He left ten-fifteen minutes ago."

"Now, that laboratory upstairs--does it open right on the stair landing?"

"Yes."

"How many doors are there?"

"Three. It's the one in the middle."

"What are the other rooms?"

"There's the small laboratory on one side and Dr. Ferris' office on the other."

"Are there connecting doors between them?"

"Yes."

Francisco was turning to his companions, when the guard said pleadingly, "Mister, can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"Who are you?"

He answered in the solemn tone of a drawing-room introduction, "Francisco Domingo Carlos Andres Sebastián d'Anconia."

He left the guard gaping at him and turned to a brief, whispered consultation with his companions.

In a moment, it was Rearden who went up the stairs—swiftly, soundlessly and alone.

Cages containing rats and guinea pigs were stacked against the walls of the laboratory; they had been put there by the guards who were playing poker on the long laboratory table in the center. Six of them were playing, two were standing in opposite corners, watching the entrance door, guns in hand. It was Rearden's face that saved him from being shot on sight when he entered: his face was too well known to them and too unexpected. He saw eight heads staring at him with recognition and with inability to believe what they were recognizing.

He stood at the door, his hands in the pockets of his trousers, with the casual, confident manner of a business executive.

"Who is in charge here?" he asked in the politely abrupt voice of a man who does not waste time.

"You . . . you're not . . ." stammered a lanky, surly individual at the card table.

"I'm Hank Rearden. Are you the chief?"

"Yeah! but where in blazes do *you* come from?"

"From New York."

"What are you doing here?"

"Then I take it, you have not been notified."

"Should I have . . . I mean, about *what*?" The swift, touchy, resentful suspicion that his superiors had slighted his authority, was obvious in the chief's voice. He was a tall, emaciated man, with jerky movements, a sallow face and the restless, unfocused eyes of a drug addict.

"About my business here."

"You . . . you can't have any business here," he snapped, torn between the fear of a bluff and the fear of having been left out of some important, top-level decision. "Aren't you a traitor and a deserter and a—"

"I see that you're behind the times, my good man."

The seven others in the room were staring at Rearden with an awed, superstitious uncertainty. The two who held guns still held them aimed at him in the impassive manner of automatons. He did not seem to take notice of them.

"What is it *you* say is your business here?" snapped the chief.

"I am here to take charge of the prisoner whom you are to deliver to me."

"If you came from headquarters, you'd know that I'm not supposed to know anything about any prisoner—and that nobody is to touch him!"

"Except me."

The chief leaped to his feet, darted to a telephone and seized the receiver. He had not raised it halfway to his ear when he dropped it abruptly with a gesture that sent a vibration of panic through the room: he had had time to hear that the telephone was dead and to know that the wires were cut.

His look of accusation, as he whirled to Rearden, broke against the faintly contemptuous reproof of Rearden's voice: "That's no way to guard a building—if *this* is what you allowed to happen. Better let me have the prisoner, before anything happens to him—if you don't want me to report you for negligence, as well as insubordination."

The chief dropped heavily back on his chair, slumped forward across the table and looked up at Rearden with a glance that made his emaciated face resemble the animals that were beginning to stir in the cages.

"Who is the prisoner?" he asked.

"My good man," said Rearden, "If your immediate superiors did not see fit to tell you, I certainly will not."

"They didn't see fit to tell me about your coming here, either!" yelled the chief, his voice confessing the helplessness of anger and broadcasting the vibrations of impotence to his men. "How do I know you're on the level? With the phone out of order, who's going to tell me? How am I to know what to do?"

"That's *your* problem, not mine."

"I don't believe you!" His cry was too shrill to project conviction. "I don't believe that the government would send you on a mission, when you're one of those vanishing traitors and friends of John Galt who—"

"But haven't you heard?"

"What?"

"John Galt has made a deal with the government and has brought us all back."

"Oh, thank God!" cried one of the guards, the youngest.

"Shut your mouth! You're not to have any political opinions!" snapped the chief, and jerked back to Rearden. "Why hasn't it been announced on the radio?"

"Do you presume to hold opinions on when and how the government should choose to announce its policies?"

In the long moment of silence, they could hear the rustle of the animals clawing at the bars of their cages.

"I think I should remind you," said Rearden, "that your job is not to question orders, but to obey them, that you are not to *know* or understand the politics of your superiors, that you are not to judge, to choose or to doubt."

"But I don't know whether I'm supposed to obey *you*!"

"If you refuse, you'll take the consequences."