

Crouching against the table, the chief moved his glance slowly, appraisingly, from Rearden's face to the two gunmen in the corners. The gunmen steadied their aim by an almost imperceptible movement. A nervous rustle went through the room. An animal squeaked shrilly in one of the cages.

"I think I should also tell you," said Rearden, his voice faintly harder, "that I am not alone. My friends are waiting outside."

"Where?"

"All around this room."

"How many?"

"You'll find out—one way or the other."

"Say, Chief," moaned a shaky voice from among the guards, "we don't want to tangle with *those* people, they're—"

"Shut up!" roared the chief, leaping to his feet and brandishing his gun in the direction of the speaker. "You're not going to turn yellow on me, any of you bastards!" He was screaming to ward off the knowledge that they had. He was swaying on the edge of panic, fighting against the realization that something somehow had disarmed his men. "There's nothing to be scared of!" He was screaming it to himself, struggling to recapture the safety of his only sphere: the sphere of violence. "Nothing and nobody! I'll show you!" He whirled around, his hand shaking at the end of his sweeping arm, and fired at Rearden.

Some of them saw Rearden sway, his right hand gripping his left shoulder. Others, in the same instant, saw the gun drop out of the chief's hand and hit the floor in time with his scream and with the spurt of blood from his wrist. Then all of them saw Francisco d'Anconia standing at the door on the left, his soundless gun still aimed at the chief.

All of them were on their feet and had drawn their guns, but they lost that first moment, not daring to fire.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," said Francisco.

"Jesus!" gasped one of the guards, struggling for the memory of a name he could not capture. "That's . . . that's the guy who blew up all the copper mines in the world!"

"It is," said Rearden.

They had been backing involuntarily away from Francisco—and turned to see that Rearden still stood at the entrance door, with a pointed gun in his right hand and a dark stain spreading on his left shoulder.

"Shoot, you bastards!" screamed the chief to the wavering men. "What are you waiting for? Shoot them down!" He was leaning with one arm against the table, blood running out of the other. "I'll report any man who doesn't fight! I'll have him sentenced to death for it!"

"Drop your guns," said Rearden.

The seven guards stood frozen for an instant, obeying neither.

"Let me out of here!" screamed the youngest, dashing for the door on the right.

He threw the door open and sprang back: Dagny Taggart stood on the threshold, gun in hand.

The guards were drawing slowly to the center of the room, fighting

an invisible battle in the fog of their minds, disarmed by a sense of unreality in the presence of the legendary figures they had never expected to see, feeling almost as if they were ordered to fire at ghosts.

"Drop your guns," said Rearden. "You don't know why you're here. We do. You don't know who your prisoner is. We do. You don't know why your bosses want you to guard him. We know why we want to get him out. You don't know the purpose of your fight. We know the purpose of ours. If you die, you won't know what you're dying for. If we do, we will."

"Don't . . . don't listen to him!" snarled the chief. "Shoot! I order you to shoot!"

One of the guards looked at the chief, dropped his gun and, raising his arms, backed away from the group toward Rearden.

"God damn you!" yelled the chief, seized a gun with his left hand and fired at the deserter.

In time with the fall of the man's body, the window burst into a shower of glass—and from the limb of a tree, as from a catapult, the tall, slender figure of a man flew into the room, landed on its feet and fired at the first guard in reach.

"Who are you?" screamed some terror-blinded voice.

"Ragnar Danneskjöld."

Three sounds answered him: a long, swelling moan of panic—the clatter of four guns dropped to the floor—and the bark of the fifth, fired by a guard at the forehead of the chief.

By the time the four survivors of the garrison began to reassemble the pieces of their consciousness, their figures were stretched on the floor, bound and gagged; the fifth one was left standing, his hands tied behind his back.

"Where is the prisoner?" Francisco asked him.

"In the cellar . . . I guess."

"Who has the key?"

"Dr. Ferris."

"Where are the stairs to the cellar?"

"Behind a door in Dr. Ferris' office."

"Lead the way."

As they started, Francisco turned to Rearden. "Are you all right, Hank?"

"Sure."

"Need to rest?"

"Hell, no!"

From the threshold of a door in Ferris' office, they looked down a steep flight of stone stairs and saw a guard on the landing below.

"Come here with your hands up!" ordered Francisco.

The guard saw the silhouette of a resolute stranger and the glint of a gun: it was enough. He obeyed immediately; he seemed relieved to escape from the damp stone crypt. He was left tied on the floor of the office, along with the guard who had led them.

Then the four rescuers were free to fly down the stairs to the locked steel door at the bottom. They had acted and moved with

the precision of a controlled discipline. Now, it was as if their inner reins had broken.

Danneskjöld had the tools to smash the lock. Francisco was first to enter the cellar, and his arm barred Dagny's way for the fraction of a second—for the length of a look to make certain that the sight was bearable—then he let her rush past him: beyond the tangle of electric wires, he had seen Galt's lifted head and glance of greeting.

She fell down on her knees by the side of the mattress. Galt looked up at her, as he had looked on their first morning in the valley, his smile was like the sound of a laughter that had never been touched by pain, his voice was soft and low:

"We never had to take any of it seriously, did we?"

Tears running down her face, but her smile declaring a full, confident, radiant certainty, she answered, "No, we never had to."

Rearden and Danneskjöld were cutting his bonds. Francisco held a flask of brandy to Galt's lips. Galt drank, and raised himself to lean on an elbow when his arms were free. "Give me a cigarette," he said.

Francisco produced a package of dollar-sign cigarettes. Galt's hand shook a little, as he held a cigarette to the flame of a lighter, but Francisco's hand shook much more.

Glancing at his eyes over the flame, Galt smiled and said in the tone of an answer to the questions Francisco was not asking, "Yes, it was pretty bad, but bearable—and the kind of voltage they used leaves no damage."

"I'll find them some day, whoever they were . . ." said Francisco; the tone of his voice, flat, dead and barely audible, said the rest.

"If you do, you'll find that there's nothing left of them to kill."

Galt glanced at the faces around him; he saw the intensity of the relief in their eyes and the violence of the anger in the grimness of their features; he knew in what manner they were now reliving his torture.

"It's over," he said. "Don't make it worse for yourself than it was for me."

Francisco turned his face away. "It's only that it was you . . ." he whispered, "you . . . if it were anyone but you . . ."

"But it had to be me, if they were to try their last, and they've tried, and"—he moved his hand, sweeping the room—and the meaning of those who had made it—into the wastelands of the past—"and that's that."

Francisco nodded, his face still turned away; the violent grip of his fingers clutching Galt's wrist for a moment was his answer.

Galt lifted himself to a sitting posture, slowly regaining control of his muscles. He glanced up at Dagny's face, as her arm shot forward to help him; he saw the struggle of her smile against the tension of her resisted tears; it was the struggle of her knowledge that nothing could matter beside the sight of his naked body and that his body was living—against her knowledge of what it had endured. Holding her glance, he raised his hand and touched the collar of her white sweater with his fingertips, in acknowledgment and in reminder of