She answered, looking at him in understanding, her voice gentler, "I have stopped thinking of a future or of a railroad system. I intend to continue running trains so long as it is still possible to run them. I don't think that it will be much longer."

She walked away from the table, to the window, to stand aside and let them continue without her.

She looked at the city. Jim had obtained the permit which allowed them the use of electric power to the top of the Taggart Building. From the height of the room, the city looked like a flattened remnant, with but a few rare, lonely streaks of lighted glass still rising through the darkness to the sky.

She did not listen to the voices of the men behind her. She did not know for how long the broken snatches of their struggle kept rolling past her--the sounds that nudged and prodded one another, trying to edge back and leave someone pushed forward—a struggle, not to assert one's own will, but to squeeze an assertion from some unwilling victim—a battle in which the decision was to be pronounced, not by the winner, but by the loser:

"It seems to me . . . It is, I think . . . It must, in my opinion . . . If we were to suppose . . I am merely suggesting . . . I am not implying, but . If we consider both sides . . It is, in my opinion, indubitable . . . It seems to me to be an unmistakable fact . . ."

She did not know whose voice it was, but she heard it when the voice pronounced:

" . . . and, therefore, I move that the John Galt Line be closed."

Something, she thought, had made him call the Line by its right name.

You had to bear it, too, generations ago—and it was just as hard for you, just as bad, but you did not let it stop you--was it really as bad as this? as ugly? —never mind, it's different forms, but it's only pain, and you were not stopped by pain, not by whatever kind it was that you had to bear—you were not stopped—you did not give in to it—you faced it and this is the kind I have to face—you fought and I will have to—you did it—I will try . . . She heard, in her own mind, the quiet intensity of the words of dedication--and it was some time before she realized that she was speaking to Nat Taggart.

The next voice she heard was Mr Weatherby's: "Wait a minute, boys. Do you happen to remember that you need to obtain permission before you can close a branch line?"

"Good God, Clem!" Taggart's cry was open panic: "Surely there's not going to be any trouble about—"

"I wouldn't be too sure of it. Don't forget that you're a public service and you're expected to provide transportation, whether you make money or not."

"But you know that it's impossible!"

"Well, that's fine for you, that solves your problem, if you close that Line—but what will it do to us? Leaving a whole state like Colorado practically without transportation—what sort of public sentiment will it arouse? Now, of course, if you gave Wesley something in return, to balance it, if you granted the unions' wage raises—"

"I can't! I gave my word to the National Alliance!"

"Your word? Well, suit yourself. We wouldn't want to force the Alliance. We much prefer to have things happen voluntarily. But these are difficult times and it's hard telling what's liable to happen. With everybody going broke and the tax receipts falling, we might—fact being that we hold well over fifty per cent of the Taggart bonds—we might be compelled to call for the payment of railroad bonds within six months."

"*What?!*" screamed Taggart.

"—or sooner."

"But you can't! Oh God, you can't! It was understood that the moratorium was for five years! It was a contract, an obligation! We are counting on it!"

"An obligation? Aren't you old-fashioned, Jim? There aren't any obligations, except the necessity of the moment. The original owners of those bonds were counting on their payments, too."

Dagny burst out laughing.

She could not stop herself, she could not resist it, she could not reject a moment's chance to avenge Ellis Wyatt, Andrew Stockton, Lawrence Hammond, all the others. She said, torn by laughter:

"Thanks, Mr. Weatherby!"

Mr. Weatherby looked at her in astonishment. "Yes?" he asked coldly.

"I knew that we would have to pay for those bonds one way or another. We're paying."

"Miss Taggart," said the chairman severely, "don't you think that I-told-you-so's are futile? To talk of what would have happened if we had acted differently is nothing but purely theoretical speculation. We cannot indulge in theory, we have to deal with the practical reality of the moment."

"Right," said Mr. Weatherby. "That's what you ought to be—practical. Now we offer you a trade. You do something for us and we'll do something for you. You give the unions their wage raises and we'll give you permission to close the Rio Norte Line."

"All right," said James Taggart, his voice choked.

Standing at the window, she heard them vote on their decision. She heard them declare that the John Galt Line would end in six weeks, on March 31.

It's only a matter of getting through the next few moments, she thought; take care of the next few moments, and then the next, a few at a time, and after a while it will be easier; you'll get over it, after a while.

The assignment she gave herself for the next few moments was to put on her coat and be first to leave the room.

Then there was the assignment of riding in an elevator down the great, silent length of the Taggart Building. Then there was the assignment of crossing the dark lobby.

Halfway through the lobby, she stopped. A man stood leaning against the wall, in a manner of purposeful waiting—and it was she who was his purpose, because he was looking straight at her. She did not recognize him at once, because she felt certain that the face she saw could not possibly be there in that lobby at this hour.

"Hi, Slug," he said softly.

She answered, groping for some great distance that had once been hers, "Hi, Frisco."

"Have they finally murdered John Galt?"

She struggled to place the moment into some orderly sequence of time. The question belonged to the present, but the solemn face came from those days on the hill by the Hudson when he would have understood all that the question meant to her.

"How did you know that they'd do it tonight?" she asked.

"It's been obvious for months that would be the next step at their next meeting."

"Why did you come here?"

"To see how you'd take it."

"Want to laugh about it?"

"No, Dagny. I don't want to laugh about it."

She saw no hint of amusement in his face; she answered trustingly, "I don't know how I'm taking it."

"I do."

"I was expecting it, I knew they'd have to do it, so now it's only a matter of getting through"--*tonight*, she wanted to say, but said--"all the work and details."

He took her arm. "Let's go some place where we can have a drink together."

"Francisco, why don't you laugh at me? You've always laughed about that Line."

"I will --tomorrow, when I see you going on with all the work and details. Not tonight."

"Why not?"

"Come on. You're in no condition to talk about it."

"I--" She wanted to protest, but said, "No, I guess I'm not."

He led her out to the street, and she found herself walking silently in time with the steady rhythm of his steps, the grasp of his fingers on her arm unstressed and firm. He signaled a passing taxicab and held the door open for her. She obeyed him without questions; but felt relief, like a swimmer who stops struggling. The spectacle of a man acting with assurance, was a life belt thrown to her at a moment when she had forgotten the hope of its existence. The relief was not in the surrender of responsibility, but in the sight of a man able to assume it.

"Dagny," he said, looking at the city as it moved past their taxi window, "think of the first man who thought of making a steel girder. He knew what he saw, what he thought and what he wanted. He did not say, 'It seems to me,' and he did not take orders from those who say, 'In my opinion.' "

She chuckled, wondering at his accuracy: he had guessed the nature of the sickening sense that held her, the sense of a swamp which she had to escape.

"Look around you," he said. "A city is the frozen shape of human courage—the courage of those men who thought for the first time of every bolt, rivet and power generator that went to make it. The courage to say, not 'It seems to me,' but '*It is*'—and to stake one's