close for her as tightly, Atlantis would descend under a vault of rays more impregnable than the bottom of the ocean, and she, too, would be left to struggle for the things she had not known how to see, she, too, would be left to fight a mirage of primordial savagery, while the reality of all that she desired would never come again within her reach.

But the pull of the outer world, the pull that drew her to follow the plane, was not the image of Hank Rearden—she knew that she could not return to him, even if she returned to the world—the pull was the vision of Hank Rearden's courage and the courage of all those still fighting to stay alive. He would not give up the search for her plane, when all others had long since despaired, as he would not give up his mills, as he would not give up any goal he had chosen if a single chance was left. Was she certain that no chance remained for the world of Taggart Transcontinental? Was she certain that the terms of the battle were such that she could not care to win? They were right, the men of Atlantis, they were right to vanish if they knew that they left no value behind them—but until and unless she saw that no chance was untaken and no battle unfought, she had *no right* to remain among them. This was the question that had lashed her for weeks, but had not driven her to a glimpse of the answer.

She lay awake through the hours of that night, quietly motionless, following—like an engineer and like Hank Rearden—a process of dispassionate, precise, almost mathematical consideration, with no regard for cost or feeling. The agony which he lived in his plane, she lived it in a soundless cube of darkness, searching, but finding no answer. She looked at the inscriptions on the walls of her room, faintly visible in patches of starlight, but the help those men had called in their darkest hour was not hers to call.

* *

"Yes or no, Miss Taggart?"

She looked at the faces of the four men in the soft twilight of Mulligan's living room: Galt, whose face had the serene, impersonal attentiveness of a scientist—Francisco, whose face was made expressionless by the hint of a smile, the kind of smile that would fit either answer—Hugh Akston who looked compassionately gentle—Midas Mulligan, who had asked the question with no touch of rancor in his voice. Somewhere two thousand miles away, at this sunset hour, the page of a calendar was springing into light over the roofs of New York, saying: June 28—and it seemed to her suddenly that she was seeing it, as if it were hanging over the heads of these men.

"I have one more day," she said steadily. "Will you let me have it? I think I've reached my decision, but I am not fully certain of it and I'll need all the certainty possible to me."

"Of course," said Mulligan. "You have, in fact, until morning of the day after tomorrow. We'll wait."

"We'll wait after that as well," said Hugh Akston, "though in your absence, if that be necessary."

She stood by the window, facing them, and she felt a moment's satisfaction in the knowledge that she stood straight, that her hands did not tremble, that her voice sounded as controlled, uncomplaining

and unpitying as theirs; it gave her a moment's feeling of a bond to them.

"If any part of your uncertainty," said Galt, "is a conflict between your heart and your mind—follow your mind."

"Consider the reasons which make us certain that we are right," said Hugh Akston, "but not the fact that we are certain. If you are not convinced, ignore our certainty. Don't be tempted to substitute our judgment for your own."

"Don't rely on our knowledge of what's best for your future," said Mulligan. "We do know, but it can't be best until *you* know it."

"Don't consider our interests or desires," said Francisco. "You have no duty to anyone but yourself."

She smiled, neither sadly nor gaily, thinking that none of it was the sort of advice she would have been given in the outer world. And knowing how desperately they wished to help her where no help was possible, she felt it was her part to give them reassurance.

"I forced my way here," she said quietly, "and I was to bear responsibility for the consequences. I'm bearing it."

Her reward was to see Galt smile: the smile was like a military decoration bestowed upon her.

Looking away, she remembered suddenly Jeff Allen, the tramp aboard the Comet, in the moment when she had admired him for attempting to tell her that he knew where he was going, to spare her the burden of his aimlessness. She smiled faintly, thinking that she had now experienced it in both roles and knew that no action could be lower or more futile than for one person to throw upon another the burden of his abdication of choice. She felt an odd calm, almost a confident repose, she knew that it was tension, but the tension of a great clarity. She caught herself thinking: She's functioning well in an emergency. I'll be all right with her—and realized that she was thinking of herself.

"Let it go till day after tomorrow, Miss Taggart," said Midas Mulligan. "Tonight you're still here."

"Thank you," she said.

She remained by the window, while they went on discussing the valley's business; it was their closing conference of the month. They had just finished dinner—and she thought of her first dinner in this house a month ago; she was wearing, as she had then worn, the gray suit that belonged in her office, not the peasant skirt that had been so easy to wear in the sun. I'm still here tonight, she thought, her hand pressed possessively to the window sill.

The sun had not yet vanished beyond the mountains, but the sky was an even, deep, deceptively clear blue that blended with the blue of invisible clouds into a single spread, hiding the sun; only the edges of the clouds were outlined by a thin thread of flame, and it looked like a glowing, twisted net of neon tubing, she thought . . . like a chart of winding rivers . . . like . . . like the map of a railroad traced in white fire on the sky.

She heard Mulligan giving Galt the names of those who were not returning to the outer world. "We have jobs for all of them," said Mulligan. "In fact, there's only ten or twelve men who're going back

this year—mostly to finish off, convert whatever they own and come here permanently. I think this was our last vacation month, because before another year is over we'll all be living in this valley."

"Good," said Galt.

"We'll have to, from the way things are going outside."

"Yes."

"Francisco," said Mulligan, "you'll come back in a few months?"

"In November at the latest," said Francisco. "I'll send you word by short wave, when I'm ready to come back—will you turn the furnace on in my house?"

"I will," said Hugh Akston. "And I'll have your supper ready for you when you arrive."

"John, I take it for granted," said Mulligan, "that you're not returning to New York this time."

Galt took a moment to glance at him, then answered evenly, "I have not decided it yet."

She noticed the shocked swiftness with which Francisco and Mulligan bent forward to stare at him—and the slowness with which Hugh Akston's glance moved to his face; Akston did not seem to be astonished.

"You're not thinking of going back to that hell for another year, are you?" said Mulligan.

"I am."

"But—good God, John!—what for?"

"I'll tell you, when I've decided."

"But there's nothing left there for you to do. We got everybody we knew of or can hope to know of. Our list is completed, except for Hank Rearden—and we'll get *him* before the year is over—and Miss Taggart, if she so chooses That's all Your job is done. There's nothing to look for, out there—except the final crash, when the roof comes down on their heads."

"I know it."

"John, yours is the one head I don't want to be there when it happens."

"You've never had to worry about me."

"But don't you realize what stage they're coming to? They're only one step away from open violence—hell, they've taken the step and sealed and declared it long ago!—but in one more moment they'll see the full reality of what they've taken, exploding in their damned faces—plain, open, blind, arbitrary, bloodshedding violence, running amuck, hitting anything and anyone at random. That's what I don't want to see you in the midst of."

"I can take care of myself."

"John, there's no reason for you to take the risk," said Francisco.

"What risk?"

"The looters are worried about the men who've disappeared. They're suspecting something. You, of all people, shouldn't stay there any longer. There's always a chance that they might discover just who and what you are."

"There's some chance. Not much."