

Line—it was to her honor that they had entrusted their money, the saving and achievement of years, it was on her ability that they had staked it, it was on her work that they had relied and on their own—and she had been made to betray them into a looters' trap: there would be no trains and no life-blood of freight, the John Galt Line had been only a drainpipe that had permitted Jim Taggart to make a deal and to drain their wealth, unearned, into his pocket, in exchange for letting others drain his railroad—the bonds of the John Galt Line, which, this morning, had been the proud guardians of their owners' security and future, had become in the space of an hour, scraps of paper that no one would buy, with no value, no future, no power, save the power to close the doors and stop the wheels of the last hope of the country—and Taggart Transcontinental was not a living plant, fed by blood it had worked to produce, but a cannibal of the moment, devouring the unborn children of greatness.

The tax on Colorado, she thought, the tax collected from Ellis Wyatt to pay for the livelihood of those whose job was to tie him and make him unable to live, those who would stand on guard to see that he got no trains, no tank cars, no pipeline of Rearden Metal—Ellis Wyatt, stripped of the right of self-defense, left without voice, without weapons, and worse: made to be the tool of his own destruction, the supporter of his own destroyers, the provider of their food and of their weapons—Ellis Wyatt being choked, with his own bright energy turned against him as the noose—Ellis Wyatt, who had wanted to tap an unlimited source of shale oil and who spoke of a second Renaissance. . . .

She sat bent over, her head on her arms, slumped at the ledge of the window—while the great curves of the green-blue rail, the mountains, the valleys, the new towns of Colorado went by in the darkness, unseen.

The sudden jolt of brakes on wheels threw her upright. It was an unscheduled stop, and the platform of the small station was crowded with people, all looking off in the same direction. The passengers around her were pressing to the windows, staring. She leaped to her feet, she ran down the aisle, down the steps, into the cold wind sweeping the platform.

In the instant before she saw it and her scream cut the voices of the crowd, she knew that she had known that which she was to see. In a break between mountains, lighting the sky, throwing a glow that swayed on the roofs and walls of the station, the hill of Wyatt Oil was a solid sheet of flame.

Later, when they told her that Ellis Wyatt had vanished, leaving nothing behind but a board he had nailed to a post at the foot of the hill, when she looked at his handwriting on the board, she felt as if she had almost known that these would be the words:

"I am leaving it as I found it. Take over. It's yours." !

PART TWO

EITHER-OR

Chapter 1 THE MAN WHO BELONGED ON EARTH

Dr. Robert Stadler paced his office, wishing he would not feel the cold.

Spring had been late in coming. Beyond the window, the dead gray of the hills looked like the smeared transition from the soiled white of the sky to the leaden black of the river. Once in a while, a distant patch of hillside flared into a silver-yellow that was almost green, then vanished. The clouds kept cracking for the width of a single sunray, then oozing closed again. It was not cold in the office, thought Dr. Stadler, it was that view that froze the place.

It was not cold today, the chill was in his bones—he thought—the stored accumulation of the winter months, when he had had to be distracted from his work by an awareness of such a matter as inadequate heating and people had talked about conserving fuel. It was preposterous, he thought, this growing intrusion of the accidents of nature into the affairs of men: it had never mattered before, if a winter happened to be unusually severe; if a flood washed out a section of railroad track, one did not spend two weeks eating canned vegetables; if an electric storm struck some power station, an establishment such as the State Science Institute was not left without electricity for five days. Five days of stillness this winter, he thought, with the great laboratory motors stopped and irretrievable hours wiped out, when his staff had been working on problems that involved the heart of the universe. He turned angrily away from the window—but stopped and turned back to it again. He did not want to see the book that lay on his desk.

He wished Dr. Ferris would come. He glanced at his watch: Dr. Ferris was late—an astonishing matter—late for an appointment with him—Dr. Floyd Ferris, the valet of science, who had always faced him in a manner that suggested an apology for having but one hat to take off.

This was outrageous weather for the month of May, he thought, looking down at the river; it was certainly the weather that made him feel as he did, not the book. He had placed the book in plain view on his desk, when he had noted that his reluctance to see it was more than mere revulsion, that it contained the element of an emotion never to be admitted. He told himself that he had risen