

The groceries, which Lawrence Hammond was lining up at her order on the polished counter of his store, had never appeared to her as such shining objects—and, intent upon them, she was only half-conscious of some disturbing element, of something that was wrong but that her mind was too full to notice. She noticed it only when she saw Hammond pause, frown and stare upward, at the sky beyond his open store front.

In time with his words: "I think somebody's trying to repeat your stunt, Miss Taggart," she realized that it was the sound of an airplane overhead and that it had been there for some time, a sound which was not to be heard in the valley after the first of this month.

They rushed out to the street. The small silver cross of a plane was circling above the ring of mountains, like a sparkling dragonfly about to brush the peaks with its wings.

"What does he think he's doing?" said Lawrence Hammond.

There were people at the doors of the shops and standing still all down the street, looking up.

"Is . . . is anyone expected?" she asked and was astonished by the anxiety of her own voice.

"No," said Hammond. "Everyone who's got any business here is here." He did not sound disturbed, but grimly curious.

The plane was now a small dash, like a silver cigarette, streaking against the flanks of the mountains: it had dropped lower.

"Looks like a private monoplane," said Hammond, squinting against the sun. "Not an army model."

"Will the ray screen hold out?" she asked tensely, in a tone of defensive resentment against the approach of an enemy.

He chuckled. "Hold out?"

"Will he see us?"

"That screen is safer than an underground vault, Miss Taggart. As you ought to know."

The plane rose, and for a moment it was only a bright speck, like a bit of paper blown by the wind—it hovered uncertainly, then dropped down again into another circling spiral.

"What in hell is he after?" said Hammond.

Her eyes shot suddenly to his face.

"He's looking for something," said Hammond. "What?"

"Is there a telescope somewhere?"

"Why—yes, at the airfield, but—" He was about to ask what was the matter with her voice—but she was running across the road, down the path to the airfield, not knowing that she was running, driven by a reason she had no time and no courage to name.

She found Dwight Sanders at the small telescope of the control tower; he was watching the plane attentively, with a puzzled frown.

"Let me see it!" she snapped.

She clutched the metal tube, she pressed her eye to the lens, her hand guiding the tube slowly to follow the plane—then he saw that her hand had stopped, but her fingers did not open and her face remained bent over the telescope, pressed to the lens, until he looked closer and saw that the lens was pressed to her forehead.

"What's the matter, Miss Taggart?"

She raised her head slowly.

"Is it anyone you know, Miss Taggart?"

She did not answer. She hurried away, her steps rushing with the zigzagging aimlessness of uncertainty—she dared not run, but she had to escape, she had to hide, she did not know whether she was afraid to be seen by the men around her or by the plane above—the plane whose silver wings bore the number that belonged to Hank Rearden.

She stopped when she stumbled over a rock and fell and noticed that she had been running. She was on a small ledge in the cliffs above the airfield, hidden from the sight of the town, open to the view of the sky. She rose, her hands groping for support along a granite wall, feeling the warmth of the sun on the rock under her palms—she stood, her back pressed to the wall, unable to move or to take her eyes off the plane.

The plane was circling slowly, dipping down, then rising again, struggling—she thought—as she had struggled, to distinguish the sight of a wreck in a hopeless spread of crevices and boulders, an elusive spread neither clear enough to abandon nor to survey. He was searching for the wreck of her plane, he had not given up, and whatever the three weeks of it had cost him, whatever he felt, the only evidence he would give to the world and his only answer was this steady, insistent, monotonous drone of a motor carrying a fragile craft over every deadly foot of an inaccessible chain of mountains.

Through the brilliant purity of the summer air, the plane seemed intimately close, she could see it rock on precarious currents and bank under the thrusts of wind. She could see, and it seemed impossible that so clear a sight was closed to his eyes. The whole of the valley lay below him, flooded by sunlight, flaming with glass panes and green lawns, screaming to be seen—the end of his tortured quest, the fulfillment of more than his wishes, not the wreck of her plane and her body, but her living presence and his freedom—all that he was seeking or had ever sought was now spread open before him, open and waiting, his to be reached by a straight-line dive through the pure, clear air—his and asking nothing of him but the capacity to see. "Hank!" she screamed, waving her arms in desperate signal. "Hank!"

She fell back against the rock, knowing that she had no way to reach him, that she had no power to give him sight, that no power on earth could pierce that screen except his own mind and vision. Suddenly and for the first time, she felt the screen, not as the most intangible, but as the most grimly absolute barrier in the world.

Slumped against the rock, she watched, in silent resignation, the hopeless circles of the plane's struggle and its motor's uncomplaining cry for help, a cry she had no way to answer. The plane swooped down abruptly, but it was only the start of its final rise, it cut a swift diagonal across the mountains and shot into the open sky. Then, as if caught in the spread of a lake with no shores and no exit, it went sinking slowly and drowning out of sight.

She thought, in bitter compassion, of how much he had failed to see. And I?—she thought. If she left the valley, the screen would