

you safely to the top councils of the national leadership, where your presence is urgently needed." He paused, but got no answer. "The country's top leaders desire to confer with you—just to confer and to reach a friendly understanding."

The soldiers were finding nothing but garments and kitchen utensils; there were no letters, no books, not even a newspaper, as if the room were the habitation of an illiterate.

"Our objective is only to assist you to assume your rightful place in society, Mr. Galt. You do not seem to realize your own public value."

"I do."

"We are here only to protect you."

"Locked!" declared a soldier, banging his fist against the laboratory door.

The leader assumed an ingratiating smile. "What is behind that door, Mr. Galt?"

"Private property."

"Would you open it, please?"

"No."

The leader spread his hands out in a gesture of pained helplessness. "Unfortunately, my hands are tied. Orders, you know. We have to enter that room."

"Enter it."

"It's only a formality, a mere formality. There's no reason why things should not be handled amicably. Won't you please co-operate?"

"I said, no."

"I'm sure you wouldn't want us to resort to any . . . unnecessary means." He got no answer. "We have the authority to break that door down, you know—but, of course, we wouldn't want to do it." He waited, but got no answer. "Force that lock!" he snapped to the soldier.

Dagny glanced at Galt's face. He stood impassively, his head held level, she saw the undisturbed lines of his profile, his eyes directed at the door. The lock was a small, square plate of polished copper, without keyhole or fixtures.

The silence and the sudden immobility of the three brutes were involuntary, while the burglar's tools in the hands of the fourth were grating cautiously against the wood of the door.

The wood gave way easily, and small chips fell down, their thuds magnified by the silence into the rattle of a distant gun. When the burglar's jimmy attacked the copper plate, they heard a faint rustle behind the door, no louder than the sigh of a weary mind. In another minute, the lock fell out and the door shuddered forward the width of an inch.

The soldier jumped back. The leader approached, his steps irregular like hiccoughs, and threw the door open. They faced a black hole of unknown content and unrelieved darkness.

They glanced at one another and at Galt; he did not move; he stood looking at the darkness.

Dagny followed them, when they stepped over the threshold, pre-

ceded by the beams of their flashlights. The space beyond was a long shell of metal, empty but for heavy drifts of dust on the floor, an odd, grayish-white dust that seemed to belong among ruins undisturbed for centuries. The room looked dead like an empty skull.

She turned away, not to let them see in her face the scream of the knowledge of what that dust had been a few minutes ago. Don't try to open that door, he had said to her at the entrance to the powerhouse of Atlantis . . . if you tried to break it down, the machinery inside would collapse into rubble long before the door would give way. . . . Don't try to open that door—she was thinking, but knew that what she was now seeing was the visual form of the statement: Don't try to force a mind.

The men backed out in silence and went on backing toward the exit door, then stopped uncertainly, one after another, at random points of the garret, as if abandoned by a receding tide.

"Well," said Galt, reaching for his overcoat and turning to the leader, "let's go."

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Three floors of the Wayne-Falkland Hotel had been evacuated and transformed into an armed camp. Guards with machine guns stood at every turn of the long, velvet-carpeted corridors. Sentinels with bayonets stood on the landings of the fire-stairways. The elevator doors of the fifty-ninth, sixtieth and sixty-first floors were padlocked; a single door and one elevator were left as sole means of access, guarded by soldiers in full battle regalia. Peculiar-looking men loitered in the lobbies, restaurants and shops of the ground floor: their clothes were too new and too expensive, in unsuccessful imitation of the hotel's usual patrons, a camouflage impaired by the fact that the clothes were badly fitted to their wearers' husky figures and were further distorted by bulges in places where the garments of businessmen have no cause to bulge, but the garments of gunmen have. Groups of guards with Tommy guns were posted at every entrance and exit of the hotel, as well as at strategic windows of the adjoining streets.

In the center of this camp, on the sixtieth floor, in what was known as the royal suite of the Wayne-Falkland Hotel, amidst satin drapes, crystal candelabra and sculptured garlands of flowers, John Galt, dressed in slacks and shirt, sat in a brocaded armchair, one leg stretched out on a velvet hassock, his hands crossed behind his head, looking at the ceiling.

This was the posture in which Mr. Thompson found him, when the four guards, who stood outside the door of the royal suite since five A.M., opened it at eleven A.M. to admit Mr. Thompson, and locked it again.

Mr. Thompson experienced a brief flash of uneasiness when the click of the lock cut off his escape and left him alone with the prisoner. But he remembered the newspaper headlines and the radio voices, which had been announcing to the country since dawn: "John Galt is found!—John Galt is in New York!—John Galt has joined the people's cause!—John Galt is in conference with the country's

leaders, working for a speedy solution of all our problems!"—and he made himself feel that he believed it.

"Well, well, well!" he said brightly, marching up to the armchair. "So you're the young fellow who's started all the trouble— Oh," he said suddenly, as he got a closer look at the dark green eyes watching him. "Well, I . . . I'm tickled pink to meet you, Mr. Galt, just tickled pink." He added, "I'm Mr. Thompson, you know."

"How do you do," said Galt.

Mr. Thompson thudded down on a chair, the brusqueness of the movement suggesting a cheerily businesslike attitude. "Now don't go imagining that you're under arrest or some such nonsense." He pointed at the room. "This is no jail, as you can see. You can see that we'll treat you right. You're a big person, a very big person—and we know it. Just make yourself at home. Ask for anything you please. Fire any flunky that doesn't obey you. And if you take a dislike to any of the army boys outside, just breathe the word—and we'll send another one to replace him."

He paused expectantly. He received no answer.

"The only reason we brought you here is just that we wanted to talk to you. We wouldn't have done it this way, but you left us no choice. You kept hiding. And all we wanted was a chance to tell you that you got us all wrong."

He spread his hands out, palms up, with a disarming smile. Galt's eyes were watching him, without answer.

"That was some speech you made. Boy, are you an orator! You've done something to the country—I don't know what or why, but you have. People seem to want something you've got. But you thought we'd be dead set against it? That's where you're wrong. We're not. Personally, I think there was plenty in that speech that made sense. Yes, sir, I do. Of course, I don't agree with every word you said—but what the hell, you don't expect us to agree with everything, do you? Differences of opinion—that's what makes horse racing. Me, I'm always willing to change my mind. I'm open to any argument."

He leaned forward invitingly. He obtained no answer.

"The world is in a hell of a mess. Just as you said. There, I agree with you. We have a point in common. We can start from that. Something's got to be done about it. All I wanted was— Look," he cried suddenly, "why don't you let me talk to you?"

"You are talking to me."

"I . . . well, that is . . . well, you know what I mean."

"Fully."

"Well? . . . Well, what have you got to say?"

"Nothing."

"Huh?!"

"Nothing."

"Oh, come now!"

"I didn't seek to talk to you."

"But . . . but look! . . . we have things to discuss!"

"I haven't."

"Look," said Mr. Thompson, after a pause, "you're a man of ac-