

Slowly, taking her time by conscious intention, she sat down and leaned back, looking at him.

"Well?" she asked.

"I came to see you because I understand you're the only one who's got any brains in this rotten outfit."

"What can I do for you?"

"You can listen to an ultimatum." He spoke distinctly, giving an unusual clarity to every syllable. "I expect Taggart Transcontinental, nine months from now, to run trains in Colorado as my business requires them to be run. If the snide stunt you people perpetrated on the Phoenix-Durango was done for the purpose of saving yourself from the necessity of effort, this is to give you notice that you will not get away with it. I made no demands on you when you could not give me the kind of service I needed. I found someone who could. Now you wish to force me to deal with you. You expect to dictate terms by leaving me no choice. You expect me to hold my business down to the level of your incompetence. This is to tell you that you have miscalculated."

She said slowly, with effort, "Shall I tell you what I intend to do about our service in Colorado?"

"No. I have no interest in discussions and intentions. I expect transportation. What you do to furnish it and how you do it, is your problem, not mine. I am merely giving you a warning. Those who wish to deal with me, must do so on my terms or not at all. I do not make terms with incompetence. If you expect to earn money by carrying the oil I produce, you must be as good at your business as I am at mine. I wish this to be understood."

She said quietly, "I understand."

"I shan't waste time proving to you why you'd better take my ultimatum seriously. If you have the intelligence to keep this corrupt organization functioning at all, you have the intelligence to judge this for yourself. We both know that if Taggart Transcontinental runs trains in Colorado the way it did five years ago, it will ruin me. I know that this is what you people intend to do. You expect to feed off me while you can and to find another carcass to pick dry after you have finished mine. That is the policy of most of mankind today. So here is my ultimatum: it is now in your power to destroy me; I may have to go; but if I go, I'll make sure that I take all the rest of you along with me."

Somewhere within her, under the numbness that held her still to receive the lashing, she felt a small point of pain, hot like the pain of scalding. She wanted to tell him of the years she had spent looking for men such as he to work with; she wanted to tell him that his enemies were hers, that she was fighting the same battle; she wanted to cry to him: I'm not one of them! But she knew that she could not do it. She bore the responsibility for Taggart Transcontinental and for everything done in its name; she had no right to justify herself now.

Sitting straight, her glance as steady and open as his, she answered evenly, "You will get the transportation you need, Mr. Wyatt."

She saw a faint hint of astonishment in his face; this was not the

manner or the answer he had expected; perhaps it was what she had not said that astonished him most: that she offered no defense, no excuses. He took a moment to study her silently. Then he said, his voice less sharp:

"All right. Thank you. Good day."

She inclined her head. He bowed and left the office.

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"That's the story, Hank. I had worked out an almost impossible schedule to complete the Rio Norte Line in twelve months. Now I'll have to do it in nine. You were to give us the rail over a period of one year. Can you give it to us within nine months? If there's any human way to do it, do it. If not, I'll have to find some other means to finish it."

Rearden sat behind his desk. His cold, blue eyes made two horizontal cuts across the gaunt planes of his face; they remained horizontal, impassively half-closed; he said evenly, without emphasis:

"I'll do it."

Dagny leaned back in her chair. The short sentence was a shock. It was not merely relief: it was the sudden realization that nothing else was necessary to guarantee that it would be done; she needed no proofs, no questions, no explanations: a complex problem could rest safely on three syllables pronounced by a man who knew what he was saying.

"Don't show that you're relieved." His voice was mocking. "Not too obviously." His narrowed eyes were watching her with an unrevealing smile. "I might think that I hold Taggart Transcontinental in my power."

"You know that, anyway?"

"I do. And I intend to make you pay for it."

"I expect to. How much?"

"Twenty dollars extra per ton on the balance of the order delivered after today."

"Pretty steep, Hank. Is that the best price you can give me?"

"No. But that's the one I'm going to get. I could ask twice that and you'd pay it."

"Yes, I would. And you could. But you won't."

"Why won't I?"

"Because you need to have the Rio Norte Line built. It's your first showcase for Rearden Metal."

He chuckled. "That's right. I like to deal with somebody who has no illusions about getting favors."

"Do you know what made me feel relieved, when you decided to take advantage of it?"

"What?"

"That I was dealing, for once, with somebody who doesn't pretend to give favors."

His smile had a discernible quality now: it was enjoyment. "You always play it open, don't you?" he asked.

"I've never noticed you doing otherwise."

"I thought I was the only one who could afford to."

"I'm not broke, in that sense, Hank."

"I think I'm going to break you some day—in that sense."

"Why?"

"I've always wanted to."

"Don't you have enough cowards around you?"

"That's why I'd enjoy trying it—because you're the only exception. So you think it's right that I should squeeze every penny of profit I can, out of your emergency?"

"Certainly I'm not a fool. I don't think you're in business for my convenience."

"Don't you wish I were?"

"I'm not a moocher, Hank."

"Aren't you going to find it hard to pay?"

"That's my problem, not yours. I want that rail."

"At twenty dollars extra per ton."

"Okay, Hank."

"Fine. You'll get the rail. I may get my exorbitant profit—or Taggart Transcontinental may crash before I collect."

She said, without smiling, "If I don't get that line built in nine months, Taggart Transcontinental will crash."

"It won't so long as you run it."

When he did not smile, his face looked maniacal, only his eyes remained alive, active with a cold, brilliant clarity of perception. But what he was made to feel by the things he perceived no one would be permitted to know she thought, perhaps not even himself.

"They've done their best to make it harder for you haven't they?" he said.

"Yes. I was counting on Colorado to save the Taggart system. Now it's up to me to save Colorado. Nine months from now Dan Conway will close his road. If mine isn't ready, it won't be any use finishing it. You can't leave those men without transportation for a single day, let alone a week or a month. At the rate they've been growing, you can't stop them dead and then expect them to continue. It's like slamming brakes on an engine going two hundred miles an hour."

"I know."

"I can run a good railroad. I can't run it across a continent of sharecroppers who're not good enough to grow turnips successfully. I've got to have men like Ellis Wyatt to produce something to fill the trains I run. So I've got to give him a train and a track nine months from now, if I have to blast all the rest of us into hell to do it!"

He smiled, amused. "You feel very strongly about it, don't you?"

"Don't you?"

He would not answer but merely held the smile.

"Aren't you concerned about it?" she asked, almost angrily.

"No."

"Then you don't realize what it means?"

"I realize that I'm going to get the rail rolled and you're going to get the track laid in nine months."

She smiled, relaxing, wearily and a little guiltily. "Yes. I know we will. I know it's useless—getting angry at people like Jim and his