

friends. We haven't any time for it. First, I have to undo what they've done. Then afterwards"—she stopped, wondering, shook her head and shrugged—"afterwards, they won't matter."

"That's right. They won't. When I heard about that Anti-dog-eat-dog business, it made me sick. But don't worry about the goddamn bastards." The two words sounded shockingly violent, because his face and voice remained calm. "You and I will always be there to save the country from the consequences of their actions." He got up; he said, pacing the office, "Colorado isn't going to be stopped. You'll pull it through. Then Dan Conway will be back, and others. All that lunacy is temporary. It can't last. It's demented, so it has to defeat itself. You and I will just have to work a little harder for a while, that's all."

She watched his tall figure moving across the office. The office suited him; it contained nothing but the few pieces of furniture he needed, all of them harshly simplified down to their essential purpose, all of them exorbitantly expensive in the quality of materials and the skill of design. The room looked like a motor—a motor held within the glass case of broad windows. But she noticed one astonishing detail, a vase of jade that stood on top of a filing cabinet. The vase was a solid, dark green stone carved into plain surfaces; the texture of its smooth curves provoked an irresistible desire to touch it. It seemed startling in that office, incongruous with the sternness of the rest: it was a touch of sensuality.

"Colorado is a great place," he said. "It's going to be the greatest in the country. You're not sure that I'm concerned about it? That state's becoming one of my best customers, as you ought to know if you take time to read the reports on your freight traffic."

"I know. I read them."

"I've been thinking of building a plant there in a few years. To save them your transportation charges." He glanced at her. "You'll lose an awful lot of steel freight, if I do."

"Go ahead. I'll be satisfied with carrying your supplies, and the groceries for your workers, and the freight of the factories that will follow you there—and perhaps I won't have time to notice that I've lost your steel . . . What are you laughing at?"

"It's wonderful."

"What?"

"The way you don't react as everybody else does nowadays."

"Still, I must admit that for the time being you're the most important single shipper of Taggart Transcontinental."

"Don't you suppose I know it?"

"So I can't understand why Jim—" She stopped.

"—tries his best to harm my business? Because your brother Jim is a fool."

"He is. But it's more than that. There's something worse than stupidity about it."

"Don't waste time trying to figure him out. Let him spit. He's no danger to anyone. People like Jim Taggart just clutter up the world."

"I suppose so."

"Incidentally, what would you have done if I'd said I couldn't deliver your rails sooner?"

"I would have torn up sidings or closed some branch line any branch line, and I would have used the rails to finish the Rio Norte track on time."

He chuckled. "That's why I'm not worried about Taggart Transcontinental. But you won't have to start getting rail out of old sidings. Not so long as I'm in business."

She thought suddenly that she was wrong about his lack of emotion—the hidden undertone of his manner was enjoyment. She realized that she had always felt a sense of light-hearted relaxation in his presence and known that he shared it. He was the only man she knew to whom she could speak without strain or effort. This, she thought, was a mind she respected, an adversary worth matching. Yet there had always been an odd sense of distance between them: the sense of a closed door; there was an impersonal quality in his manner, something within him that could not be reached.

He had stopped at the window. He stood for a moment looking out. "Do you know that the first load of rail is being delivered to you today?" he asked.

"Of course I know it."

"Come here."

She approached him. He pointed silently. Far in the distance beyond the mill structures she saw a string of gondolas waiting on a siding. The bridge of an overhead crane cut the sky above them. The crane was moving. Its huge magnet held a load of rails glued to a disk by the sole power of contact. There was no trace of sun in the gray spread of clouds, yet the rails glistened as if the metal caught light out of space. The metal was a greenish blue. The great chain stopped over a car, descended, jerked in a brief spasm and left the rails in the car. The crane moved back in majestic indifference; it looked like the giant drawing of a geometrical theorem moving above the men and the earth.

They stood at the window watching silently, intently. She did not speak until another load of green-blue metal came moving across the sky. Then the first words she said were not about rail, track or an order completed on time. She said as if greeting a new phenomenon of nature.

"Rearden Metal."

He noticed that, but said nothing. He glanced at her, then turned back to the window.

"Hank, this is great."

"Yes."

He said it simply, openly. There was no flattered pleasure in his voice and no modesty. This she knew was a tribute to her, the rarest one person could pay another: the tribute of feeling free to acknowledge one's own greatness, knowing that it is understood.

She said, "When I think of what that metal can do, what it will make possible—Hank, this is the most important thing happening in the world today, and none of them know it."

"We know it."

They did not look at each other. They stood watching the crane on the front of the locomotive in the distance, she could distinguish the letters TT. She could distinguish the rails of the busiest industrial siding of the Taggart system.

'As soon as I can find a plant able to do it,' she said, 'I'm going to order Diesels made of Rearden Metal.'

You'll need them. How fast do you run your trains on the Rio Norte track?

Now? We're lucky if we manage to make twenty miles an hour."

He pointed at the cars. When that rail is laid, you'll be able to run trains at two hundred and fifty if you wish.

I will in a few years when we'll have cars of Rearden Metal, which will be half the weight of steel and twice as safe.

You'll have to look out for the airlines. We're working on a plane of Rearden Metal. It will weigh practically nothing and lift anything. You'll see the day of long haul, heavy freight air traffic.'

I've been thinking of what that metal will do for motors, any motors, and what sort of thing one can design now.

Have you thought of what it will do for chicken wire? Just plain chicken wire fences made of Rearden Metal that will cost a few pennies a mile and last two hundred years. And kitchenware that will be bought at the dime store and passed on from generation to generation. And ocean liners that one won't be able to dent with a torpedo.

Did I tell you that I'm having tests made of communications wire of Rearden Metal?

I'm making so many tests that I'll never get through showing people what can be done with it and how to do it.

They spoke of the metal and of the possibilities which they could not exhaust. It was as if they were standing on a mountain top, seeing a limitless plain below and roads open in all directions. But they merely spoke of mathematical figures, of weights, pressures, resistances, costs.

She had forgotten her brother and his National Alliance. She had forgotten every problem, person and event behind her; they had always been clouded in her sight, to be hurried past, to be brushed aside, never final, never quite real. *This* was reality, she thought, this sense of clear outlines of purpose, of lightness of hope. This was the way she had expected to live — she had wanted to spend no hour and take no action that would mean less than this.

She looked at him in the exact moment when he turned to look at her. They stood very close to each other. She saw in his eyes that he felt as she did. If joy is the aim and the core of existence, she thought, and if that which has the power to give one joy is always guarded as one's deepest secret, then they had seen each other naked in that moment.

He made a step back and said in a strange tone of dispassionate wonder, 'We're a couple of blackguards, aren't we?'

'Why?'

'We haven't any spiritual goals or qualities. All we're after is material things. That's all we care for.'