an element of wonder in the numbed indifference of her mind: Jim had always managed to switch the weight of his failures upon the strongest plants around him and to survive by destroying them to pay for his errors, as he had done with Dan Conway, as he had done with the industries of Colorado; but *this* did not have even the rationality of a looter—this pouncing upon the drained carcass of a weaker, a half-bankrupt competitor for a moment's delay, with nothing but a cracking bone between the pouncer and the abyss.

The impulse of the habit of reason almost pushed her to speak, to argue, to demonstrate the self-evident—but she looked at their faces and she saw that they knew it. In some terms different from hers, in some inconceivable manner of consciousness, they knew all that she could tell them, it was useless to prove to them the irrational horror of their course and of its consequences, both Meigs and Taggart knew it—and the secret of their consciousness was the means by which they escaped the finality of their knowledge.

"I see," she said quietly.

"Well, what would you rather have had me do?" screamed Taggart. "Give up our transcontinental traffic? Go bankrupt? Turn the railroad into a miserable East Coast local?" Her two words seemed to have hit him worse than any indignant objection; he seemed to be shaking with terror at that which the quiet "I see" had acknowledged seeing. "I couldn't help it! We had to have a transcontinental track! There was no way to get around the tunnel! We had no money to pay for any extra costs! Something had to be done! We had to have a track!"

Meigs was looking at him with a glance of part-astonishment, part-disgust.

"I am not arguing, Jim," she said dryly.

"We couldn't permit a railroad like Taggart Transcontinental to crash! It would have been a national catastrophe! We had to think of all the cities and industries and shippers and passengers and employees and stockholders whose lives depend on us! It wasn't just for ourselves, it was for the public welfare! Everybody agrees that the Railroad Unification Plan is practical! The best-informed—"

"Jim," she said, "if you have any further business to discuss with me—discuss it."

"You've never considered the social angle of anything," he said, in a sullen, retreating voice.

She noticed that this form of pretense was as unreal to Mr. Meigs as it was to her, though for an antipodal reason. He was looking at Jim with bored contempt. Jim appeared to her suddenly as a man who had tried to find a middle course between two poles—Meigs and herself—and who was now seeing that his course was narrowing and that he was to be ground between two straight walls.

"Mr. Meigs," she asked, prompted by a touch of bitterly amused curiosity, "what is your economic plan for day after tomorrow?"

She saw his bleary brown eyes focus upon her without expression. "You're impractical," he said.

"It's perfectly useless to theorize about the future," snapped Tag-

gart, "when we have to take care of the emergency of the moment. In the long run—"

"In the long run, we'll all be dead," said Meigs.

Then, abruptly, he shot to his feet. "I'll run along, Jim," he said. "I've got no time to waste on conversations." He added, "You talk to her about that matter of doing something to stop all those train wrecks—if she's the little girl who's such a wizard at railroading." It was said inoffensively; he was a man who would not know when he was giving offense or taking it.

"I'll see you later, Cuffy," said Taggart, as Meigs walked out with no parting glance at any of them.

Taggart looked at her, expectantly and fearfully, as if dreading her comment, yet desperately hoping to hear some word, any word.

"Well?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you anything else to discuss?"

"Well, I . . ." He sounded disappointed. "Yes!" he cried, in the tone of a desperate plunge. "I have another matter to discuss, the most important one of all, the—"

"Your growing number of train wrecks?"

"No! Not that."

"What, then?"

"It's . . .that you're going to appear on Bertram Scudder's radio program tonight."

She leaned back. "Am I?"

"Dagny, it's imperative, it's crucial, there's nothing to be done about it, to refuse is out of the question, in times like these one has no choice, and—"

She glanced at her watch. "I'll give you three minutes to explain—if you want to be heard at all. And you'd better speak straight."

"All right!" he said desperately. "It's considered most important—on the highest levels, I mean Chick Morrison and Wesley Mouch and Mr. Thompson, as high as that—that you should make a speech to the nation, a morale-building speech, you know, saying that you haven't quit."

"Why?"

"Because everybody thought you had! . . . You don't know what's been going on lately, but . . but it's sort of uncanny. The country is full of rumors, all sorts of rumors, about everything, all of them dangerous. Disruptive, I mean. People seem to do nothing but whisper. They don't believe the newspapers, they don't believe the best speakers, they believe every vicious, scare-mongering piece of gossip that comes floating around. There's no confidence left, no faith, no order, no . . . no respect for authority. People . . . people seem to be on the verge of panic."

"Well?"

"Well, for one thing, it's the damnable business of all those big industrialists who've vanished into thin air! Nobody's been able to explain it and it's giving them the jitters. There's all sorts of hysterical stuff being whispered about it, but what they whisper mostly is that 'no decent man will work for those people.' They mean the

people in Washington. Now do you see? You wouldn't suspect that you were so famous, but you are, or you've become, ever since your plane crash. Nobody believed the plane crash. They all thought you had broken the law, that is, Directive 10–289, and deserted. There's a lot of popular . . . misunderstanding of Directive 10–289, a lot of . . . well, unrest. Now you see how important it is that you go on the air and tell people that it isn't true that Directive 10–289 is destroying industry, that it's a sound piece of legislation devised for everybody's good, and that if they'll just be patient a little longer, things will improve and prosperity will return. They don't believe any public official any more. You . . . you're an industrialist, one of the few left of the old school, and the only one who's ever come back after they thought you'd gone. You're known as . . . as a reactionary who's opposed to Washington policies. So the people will believe you. It would have a great influence on them, it would buttress their confidence, it would help their morale. Now do you see?"

He had rushed on, encouraged by the odd look of her face, a look of contemplation that was almost a faint half-smile.

She had listened, hearing, through his words, the sound of Rearden's voice saying to her on a spring evening over a year ago: "They need some sort of sanction from us. I don't know the nature of that sanction—but, Dagny, I know that if we value our lives, we must not give it to them. If they put you on a torture rack, don't give it to them. Let them destroy your railroad and my mills, but don't give it to them."

"Now do you see?"

"Oh yes, Jim, I see!"

He could not interpret the sound of her voice, it was low, it was part-moan, part-chuckle, part-triumph—but it was the first sound of emotion to come from her, and he plunged on, with no choice but to hope. "I promised them in Washington that you'd speak! We can't fail them—not in an issue of this kind! We can't afford to be suspected of disloyalty. It's all arranged. You'll be the guest speaker on Bertram Scudder's program, tonight, at ten-thirty. He's got a radio program where he interviews prominent public figures, it's a national hookup, he has a large following, he reaches over twenty million people. The office of the Morale Conditioner has—"

"The *what*?"

"The Morale Conditioner—that's Chick Morrison—has called me three times, to make sure that nothing would go wrong. They've issued orders to all the news broadcasters, who've been announcing it all day, all over the country, telling people to listen to you tonight on Bertram Scudder's hour."

He looked at her as if he were demanding both an answer and the recognition that her answer was the element of least importance in these circumstances. She said, "You know what I think of the Washington policies and of Directive 10–289."

"At a time like this, we can't afford the luxury of thinking!"

She laughed aloud.

"But don't you see that you can't refuse them now?" he yelled.