

Transcontinental, he had heard the voice of a speaker pouring from a radio in someone's office, the kind of voice one expects to hear on unlighted street corners: it was screaming demands for the nationalization of the railroads.

He had walked through the corridors, his steps noisy, in order to be seen, and hasty, in order not to be stopped for questions. He had locked the door of his office, ordering his secretary not to admit any person or phone call and to tell all comers that Mr. Taggart was busy.

Then he sat at his desk, alone with blank terror. He felt as if he were trapped in a subterranean vault and the lock could never be broken again—and as if he were held on display in the sight of the whole city below, hoping that the lock would hold out for eternity. He had to be here, in this office, it was required of him, he had to sit idly and wait—wait for the unknown to descend upon him and to determine his actions—and the terror was both of who would come for him and of the fact that nobody came, nobody to tell him what to do.

The ringing of the telephones in the outer office sounded like screams for help. He looked at the door with a sensation of malevolent triumph at the thought of all those voices being defeated by the innocuous figure of his secretary, a young man expert at nothing but the art of evasion, which he practiced with the gray, rubber limpness of the amoral. The voices, thought Taggart, were coming from Colorado, from every center of the Taggart system, from every office of the building around him. He was safe so long as he did not have to hear them.

His emotions had clogged into a still, solid, opaque ball within him, which the thought of the men who operated the Taggart system could not pierce; those men were merely enemies to be outwitted. The sharper bites of fear came from the thought of the men on the Board of Directors; but his letter of resignation was his fire escape, which would leave them stuck with the fire. The sharpest fear came from the thought of the men in Washington. If they called, he would have to answer; his rubber secretary would know whose voices superseded his orders. But Washington did not call.

The fear went through him in spasms, once in a while, leaving his mouth dry. He did not know what he dreaded. He knew that it was not the threat of the radio speaker. What he had experienced at the sound of the snarling voice had been more like a terror which he felt because he was expected to feel it, a duty-terror, something that went with his position, like well-tailored suits and luncheon speeches. But under it, he had felt a sneaking little hope, swift and turtive like the course of a cockroach: if that threat took form, it would solve everything, save him from decision, save him from signing the letter . . . he would not be President of Taggart Transcontinental any longer, but neither would anyone else . . . neither would anyone else . . .

He sat, looking down at his desk, keeping his eyes and his mind out of focus. It was as if he were immersed in a pool of fog, struggling not to let it reach the finality of any form. That which exists possesses identity; he could keep it out of existence by refusing to identify it.

He did not examine the events in Colorado, he did not attempt to grasp their cause, he did not consider their consequences. He did not think. The clogged ball of emotion was like a physical weight in his chest, filling his consciousness, releasing him from the responsibility of thought. The ball was hatred—hatred as his only answer, hatred as the sole reality, hatred without object, cause, beginning or end, hatred as his claim against the universe, as a justification, as a right, as an absolute.

The screaming of the telephones went on through the silence. He knew that those pleas for help were not addressed to him, but to an entity whose shape he had stolen. It was this shape that the screams were now tearing away from him; he felt as if the ringing ceased to be sounds and became a succession of slashes hitting his skull. The object of the hatred began to take form, as if summoned by the bells. The solid ball exploded within him and flung him blindly into action.

Rushing out of the room, in defiance of all the faces around him, he went running down the halls to the Operating Department and into the anteroom of the Operating Vice-President's office.

The door to the office was open. he saw the sky in the great windows beyond an empty desk. Then he saw the staff in the anteroom around him, and the blond head of Eddie Willers in the glass cubby-hole. He walked purposefully straight toward Eddie Willers. he flung the glass door open and, from the threshold, in the sight and hearing of the room, he screamed:

"Where is she?"

Eddie Willers rose slowly to his feet and stood looking at Taggart with an odd kind of dutiful curiosity, as if this were one more phenomenon to observe among all the unprecedented things he had observed. He did not answer.

"Where is she?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Listen, you stubborn little punk, this is no time for ceremony! If you're trying to make me believe that you don't know where she is, I don't believe you! You know it and you're going to tell me, or I'll report you to the Unification Board! I'll swear to them that you know it--then try and prove that you don't!"

There was a faint tone of astonishment in Eddie's voice as he answered, "I've never attempted to imply that I don't know where she is, Jim. I know it. But I won't tell you."

Taggart's scream rose to the shrill, impotent sound that confesses a miscalculation: "Do you realize what you're saying?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"Will you repeat it"--he waved at the room—"for these witnesses?"

Eddie raised his voice a little, more in precision and clarity than in volume: "I know where she is. But I will not tell you."

"You're confessing that you're an accomplice who's aiding and abetting a deserter?"

"If that's what you wish to call it."

"But it's a crime! It's a crime against the nation. Don't you know that?"